

Doppelganger

by Nan Smith

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Summary: This is a different explanation for the mystery baby that appeared at the end of The Family Hour. What if it was all part of an enemy's plot? Can Lois and Clark discover the truth behind it, and will they be able to keep their new son?

Doppelganger

Doppelganger by Nan Smith Rated PG-13

There have been all kinds of explanations for the baby who appeared magically at the end of "The Family Hour", most of them involving H.G. Wells. But what if H.G. Wells had nothing to do with it? What if there was another reason for the appearance of the mystery child?

I know the writers intended the baby to be Superman's descendent but, since the show is no longer on the air, I can do what I want with its miraculous appearance. What if it was all part of a sinister plot? Taking that "what if" rather than the conventional one, I had a whole new set of possibilities to play with.

I have to credit my husband, Charles Smith, for letting me talk his ear off about the story, and for helping me with several plot ideas, and technical details.

As always, the characters and recognizable scenes in this story are the property of D.C. Comics, Warner Bros., December Third Productions, etc., but the story is mine.

Doppelganger

by Nan Smith (deimos1@earthlink.net)

Introduction

The room was quiet and dark, although from upstairs there came the soft murmur of voices. In his arms, the tiny bundle shifted and whimpered softly. He cradled it against him, holding it securely. Now was not the time for noise. If he was seen, his connection with this business would be exposed and that could be fatal. There were those who would willingly kill him if his role were discovered. Safety lay in complete anonymity.

The dining room doors were closed; he hoped fervently that they would muffle any stray sounds. He peered cautiously around in the dimness, searching for what he had seen through the windows earlier in the day. Ah, there it was. The bassinet sat a few feet away from the wall, empty. The couple who lived here would be more than surprised when they discovered what had been left for them during the night. He laid the infant carefully on the mattress and tucked the blue blanket gently around him, making sure that the famous "S" shield was prominently displayed. It was the most explicit clue that he could give them that this child was not ordinary. Considering who they were, he could only hope they would reach the correct conclusion. The other alternative had been unacceptable. In spite of his actions in the past, which had been less than honorable, he could not kill a baby. But the fate of the world most likely rested on the cleverness and investigative ability of the two people to whom he was entrusting this tiny creature. He had seen those qualities demonstrated before, to his chagrin. He hoped that they would be as resourceful this time.

With hands that shook only slightly, he laid a folded paper atop the blanket and turned away. In a few minutes he had left the home and disappeared silently into the night.

* * * * *

A silver Jeep Cherokee maneuvered expertly through the crowded streets of Metropolis' rush hour. Lois Lane, at the wheel, glanced in the mirror at her four month old adopted son in his car seat. The baby was blinking drowsily; Lois had noticed how the motion of a car always tended to lull CJ to sleep in record time. She returned her gaze to the heavy traffic. She was late getting home and Clark was who knew where. He had rushed out of the newsroom two hours ago, and Superman had been spotted shortly thereafter, preventing the Metropolis Ferry from taking itself and some forty passengers to a watery grave. The disaster averted, Superman had flown off. He was probably patrolling the city one last time before dinner, Lois surmised. With luck they would be able to eat in peace for once without someone yelling for his help.

At Melon Street, Lois turned right and almost immediately right once more into the parking lot of Antonio's. Since she was so late, dinner was going to be take-out Italian tonight from the authentic little Italian family restaurant Clark had found last month.. Fettucine Alfredo, she thought, and crusty Italian bread, and maybe a salad, washed down with that red wine Clark had brought home from Italy last week. Her stomach growled at the mere thought of it, reminding her that she had skipped lunch because of the Mayor's press conference. As far as Lois was concerned the answers Her Honor had given were unconvincing and incomplete, and if she thought Lois was going to drop the matter now--about her, or the City Council--she was vastly mistaken.

She pulled into a parking place and cut the engine. A few moments later she was waiting at the counter, CJ in one arm, while Giuseppe assembled the order. The little man was Antonio's brother-in-law, Lois knew. According to Clark, the restaurant was very much a family affair, and Lois had not been surprised to learn that he had already heard the history of the entire clan, and their move from Milan to the United States a generation ago, when Grandfather Antonio had established the business. Giuseppe set the bag with its steaming contents on the counter and rang up the charges, smiling cheerfully at CJ. The baby's mouth split in a wide, toothless grin in response to the attention.

"So, this is CJ? Clark has told us so much about him," the man informed Lois, cheerfully. "He's a handsome boy. Looks a lot like your husband."

"Thank you," Lois said. She counted out the money one-handed, and sniffed at the aromas emanating from the bag. "That smells heavenly, Giuseppe."

"The chef's special," he said, proudly. "You won't find better Fettucine Alfredo anywhere in Metropolis."

"I can believe it," she said. "Thanks. I better get it home before it gets cold."

"Just warm it in the microwave if it does," he told her. "It takes more than that to ruin *this* food." He winked at the baby. "Just wait, little fellow," he told CJ, who was watching him, solemnly. "In another year your mom'll let you taste it. Strained carrots just doesn't measure up."

CJ stuck a fist in his mouth, his large, brown eyes focussed unblinkingly on Giuseppe's face. He belched suddenly, and both adults laughed.

Lois picked up the bag, with care for the fragrant contents, and returned to the Jeep. Stashing the food in the back, she carefully braced the bag against spillage and settled CJ into his car seat, her mind returning to Giuseppe's remark about him as she slid behind the wheel again and started the engine.

Of course, most casual acquaintances were unaware that he was adopted. It wasn't a subject that usually came up. But the man had been right--CJ looked very much like Clark. The thin layer of hair on his head, when he had come to them three months ago, was slowly but surely growing thicker and darker; he had the same big, brown, almond-shaped eyes and long lashes, and even the tiny birthmark on his upper lip. The little dimpled chin had a determined curve like Clark's, too, and Lois often could swear, looking at him, that this baby really was Clark's son, no matter how impossible it might be. It was a mystery, all right, as was his arrival itself, but it didn't matter. He was theirs and that was all that did.

Horns blared behind her, interrupting her ruminations. She glanced in the mirror, to see a grey car cut rudely under the nose of a vegetable truck, causing the truck driver to slam on his brakes. More horns sounded. The grey car pulled into the next lane, tailgating the blue Chevy in front of him. Lois shook her head. Drivers were getting

worse every day around here. If that guy wasn't careful, Superman was going to be pulling him out of a wrecked vehicle. She sped up a little. People like that made her nervous. The last thing she needed was to get into an accident with CJ in the car.

The light in front of her turned yellow as she went through the intersection and then instantly red. That light was always too short, she thought, with the usual stab of irritation. The squeal of tires and a chorus of honking behind her caused her to glance quickly back. The grey car had gone through the red light, too, and was pulling up on her.

The back of her neck began to prickle. There was something frightening about the other driver's determination to keep up with her. The grey car drew even with her rear bumper and nudged closer.

Trying to keep one eye on traffic and one on the car that she was now almost sure was following her, Lois pressed harder on the accelerator and pulled a little ahead, but hurrying was almost impossible in the heavy traffic. Another car cut between them. Lois squinted into her rearview mirror, attempting to get a good look at the driver of the other car, but she couldn't see much of him in the mirror. He seemed to be wearing a hat, pulled down over his forehead, a pair of sunglasses, a mustache and a short, curly brown beard. She tried to memorize what she could see of his appearance and at the same time keep a car or two between them.

But rudeness and determination seemed to win out. The other car edged inexorably nearer, and it was obvious that the driver was doing his best to cut her off. Lois gritted her teeth. The grey car was pulling even with her front fender now, inching toward her as they approached an intersection. The car ahead of her went through as the turn light changed to red in her direction. She took a deep breath, slammed her foot down on the accelerator and cut left sharply in front of the other car. The driver instinctively slammed on his brakes and his tires squealed in protest. Keeping her foot to the floor, she swung farther left, made an illegal turn against the light under the nose of the traffic that was coming at her in a solid wall of vehicles, and rocketed into the cross street, her own tires shrieking their distress. Horns blared behind her, tires screeched and shouts of fury filled the air. Glancing back, she glimpsed the beginnings of a massive traffic jam with the pursuing car caught in the middle of it. She kept going, barely aware of her racing heart, single-mindedly heading for home, and safety.

* * * * *

Clark zipped through the bedroom window, changed clothing in a gush of wind and exited down the stairs in his civilian attire. Even before he reached the ground floor he knew something was wrong. He could smell Italian food, but it was in a bag resting on the coffee table, and the front door was locked and chained. Lois was sitting on the sofa, holding CJ in her lap, and she jumped slightly when he appeared suddenly on the stairs. He could hear her heart speed up. He came lightly across the living room and was beside the two of them in an instant. "What's the matter, honey?"

Lois swallowed. "I'm glad you're home."

"I would have been here sooner, but a Jeep apparently made an illegal left turn over on Palomar and Woods, and caused a big traffic jam. I had to clean it up." He saw her expression change. "What's the matter, Lois? Did something happen?"

She nodded. "Someone was trying to force me off the road." She told him the story, and while she talked he put his arms about her and CJ both. The baby, sensitive to the tension in the air, began to whimper, softly.

"You kept your head and got out of it," he said, quietly, when she had finished. "Of course, I expect no less from Lois Lane." She smiled faintly at that. "But, seriously, you did the right thing. Who do you think it was? Did you get a look at the driver?"

She shook her head. "He was all bundled up--sunglasses, hat, mustache and beard. About the only thing I could tell was that it was a man with brown hair. Not a lot to go on."

"How about the car?"

"It was a grey sedan; I think it might have been a Ford, but it was an older car and I couldn't see the brand."

"Okay," he said. "Did you call the police?" Å "Yes. They took the report, but said not to expect a lot."

"I'm afraid that's probably accurate." He stood up, drawing her with him. "Why don't I heat this food up for dinner? You'll feel better after you've had something to eat. I'm not going to let anything happen to you and CJ, Lois. Count on it."

"I know." She shook herself abruptly. "Look at me! Acting like nobody's ever been after me before. If there is, we'll handle it. The thing that shook me up was that CJ was in the car."

"I know. You had to look out for him, too." He stroked the fine, dark waves on their son's head. "But you kept him safe. That's what counts. Come on. You get the wine and I'll fix up the food. Let's eat."

* * * * *

High over Metropolis four hours later, Superman kept one ear peeled for any call for help from his wife. He hadn't wanted to make the patrol at all; his instincts said to stay home to protect the two most important people in his world, but Lois, as usual, had brought common sense back into play.

"You can't protect us every second of every day, Clark. Go on out; make your patrol, and then come back. I promise you I'll keep the doors and windows locked, and if anything seems at all wrong, I'll yell my head off. Okay?"

So he had gone, reluctantly, to do his job, but he kept a part of his attention alert for any sound from Lois. So far there had been nothing. The faintly warm night air of late summer brushed his face softly, bringing with it the smells of the great city far below him. Even this late at night Metropolis wasn't asleep; Metropolis never slept. There would be people out on the streets every hour of the day

or night. That was one of the things that he loved about it. Overhead a layer of mist reflected the city lights, and below him those lights lit up the darkness like a million jewels scattered across a swath of black velvet. The scene was peaceful and very deceptive. Metropolis was anything but peaceful at any time.

The smell of smoke wafted toward him on the wind. He turned his head, searching for the source of that odor. In an instant he had spotted it: the Stafford Building, one of the newer buildings in the business section. A plume of smoke was rising lazily from one of the windows on the 27th floor. He changed course and flew toward it.

Å' * * * * *

Lois lay in bed, trying to read. The house was quiet; she could hear CJ snuffling occasionally as he slept in his crib across the hall. The periodical rested on her lap, folded back to the article she had chosen, and she knew she had read the entire page, but she had no idea what the writer had been trying to tell her. She glanced at her little alarm clock for the third time in five minutes, and closed the magazine with a sigh of resignation.

She had told Clark to go on with his patrol, that he couldn't stand guard over CJ and her every second, and he at last grudgingly agreed, but the fact remained that what had happened that afternoon had shaken her more than she would admit to Clark, or even completely to herself.

For the first time she understood how Clark must feel trying to protect someone weaker than himself from harm, someone who meant everything to him. CJ had been in the car, solely dependent upon her for protection, and it had been a frightening experience to know that she might fail.

She glanced at the clock again. Clark should be home soon, unless he ran into something unexpected--which could happen, she reminded herself. He could wind up fighting a typhoon in the South Pacific, or an avalanche in Switzerland on a moment's notice, but she hoped he wouldn't. If he did, she knew very well that she wouldn't get much sleep tonight. Not that she would have told him so.

The telephone rang and she almost jumped out of her skin. Come on, Lois! she told herself. You're working yourself up into a real state of nerves! She picked up the receiver on the second ring. "Hello?"

A faint clicking sounded on the line, then there was nothing but that peculiar flat deadness that indicated the mute button was being held down.

"Hello?" she repeated, a prickle crawling slowly over her scalp.

Nothing. Then she heard the unmistakable sound of the receiver being hung up. She put down the phone as if it had burned her.

After a few seconds she took a grip on herself. People did that all the time in the city, she told herself. A prank, or a wrong number; that was all it was. It was silly to get upset over such a common occurrence. She glanced at the clock again.

* * * * *

ÅThe fire was in the law offices of Williams, Grover, Bender and Ross. Clark had reason to remember it. After the unfortunate death of Sheldon Bender, who had been the attorney for Lex Luthor, the responsibility for all the legal matters relating to the breakup of LexCorp was shifted to his brother, Adrian, who was a partner of this firm. Probate was still going on, and the legal matters relating to Luthor's huge business empire would undoubtedly continue for many years. Clark could only be grateful for the fact that its founder was dead.

Superman went in through the shattered window. There was no glass strewn below on the carpet, he noted absently. The window appeared to have been broken from within--reasonable to assume, since only a human fly could possibly have reached this spot unaided. The source of the smoke was immediately apparent: Adrian Bender's office was blazing, as if fueled by more than the obvious, and he could detect the pungent odor of some volatile chemical. Arson, he thought. This fire was no accident. Quickly, he sucked in his breath and released a blast of freezing air, extinguishing the flames within seconds. Judging by the sirens his super-hearing was picking up, the fire department was already on its way. He stood by the window, surveying the damage.

Bender's office safe had been opened, and the contents piled in the center of the floor. Part of the pile was blackened, but a scan with his x-ray vision revealed that the papers beneath the surface were relatively undamaged. One folder caught his attention instantly; the outside, with the logo of LexCorp stamped boldly on its surface, was singed, the edges brown and curling, but the interior was unharmed. Only it was empty. On a hunch he scanned the other papers, scorched and untouched alike, but there seemed to be nothing in the pile that matched the label on the folder. If the contents had burned, he should still be able to read the charred remnants with his enhanced vision, but there was nothing there that even remotely matched. The contents of that folder were not in the pile, burned or intact. Perhaps he had discovered the reason for the obvious arson, he considered. Something might have been in the folder which someone wanted, and a fire set to cover the theft. If he had arrived much later the evidence would have been gone. But what was "Project Doppelganger"?

He turned at the sound of the door opening. A firefighter stuck his head cautiously through the door. His expression changed. "Oh, hi, Superman. Glad to see you here. What's the scoop?"

After giving a quick summary to the fire crew, he flew off to continue his patrol, but the small incident bothered him. Anything about LexCorp always captured his attention, be it ever so trivial. LexCorp had caused him far too much pain and loss for him to easily forget, or dismiss it.Å' * * * * *

"Yeah, it was arson, all right," Police Sergeant Ed Braun was saying. "Superman got there and put it out or there wouldn't have been nothin' left. Somebody may have been trying to cover up the theft of some sort of documents. The other partners don't know anything about it."

"What does Bender have to say?" Clark asked. "Has anybody talked to him?"

"Only way you can do that is if you've got a pass to the Pearly Gates," Braun said. "He was killed last night, two blocks from his home, about the time Superman was putting out the fire. His car blew up."

"*What*?"

"Yeah. Kablooey. Car bomb, right out on the street. The guy was burned so bad you could barely tell he was human. Nasty."

Clark suppressed his instinctive wince. "I suppose they've identified him."

"Well, not exactly. The Medical Examiner didn't think it was necessary, but his insurance company insisted. Seems he had a million dollar insurance policy and they don't want to pay his ex-wife unless they're sure it's really him. They're gonna try using his dental records, I think."

"I see." Clark clicked off his recorder. "Well, let me know what they find, okay? I don't like coincidences like that."

"Neither does Henderson," Braun said. "The case isn't closed, yet."

* * * * *

"So that's where they are right now," Clark concluded. He tilted his chair back and looked up at his wife, who was leaning against the edge of his desk. Jimmy Olsen scurried by with a box of doughnuts in his hands, headed for their editor's office.

"Sounds like whatever it was might be pretty hot stuff," Lois said, thoughtfully. "And Superman said the file was labeled 'Project Doppelganger', huh? I wonder if there would be records anywhere else, say in LexCorp's files?"

"Maybe," Clark said. "It's got to be something pretty sensitive, though."

"I'll say," Lois said. "It got at least one man killed." "Å" "And a law office torched," Clark said. "You didn't see that fire, Lois. If Superman hadn't gotten there when he did, the whole floor would have burned."

She shook her head. "It sounds like we've stumbled into something pretty big here. What do you think we should do first?"

"Well, we could have Jimmy do a search. I suppose it's possible there might be some backups in LexCorp's computers..." He broke off as his phone shrilled. "Just a minute...Clark Kent." He listened for a moment and his eyebrows snapped up. "*What*? Are you sure...All right, we'll be right there." He set down the phone and got to his feet. "That was Inspector Henderson. He decided to take a personal interest after what happened to you yesterday. Someone's broken into our house."

* * * * *

"One of your neighbors called," Henderson said, as Clark unlocked the front door. "A..." He glanced at his notepad. "A Mrs. Barclay. She saw somebody hanging around the place and got nervous. The officer who came to investigate found your kitchen door had been jimmied, but whoever did it was long gone."

"I hope he scared away whoever it was," Lois said. "I told you we needed better locks, Clark."

Clark shrugged. "I'll put on a deadbolt this evening. Let's just see if they took anything, huh?"

They walked through the house, looking for anything that might have been disturbed. On the ground floor it seemed as if nothing had interested the burglar, until Lois glanced into the den. "Clark, did you leave the file cabinet open?"

"No." Clark came up behind her. "What..."

"The file drawer is open. Somebody's been going through our records."

"Now what the dickens..." Clark stepped forward, lifted his glasses casually and scanned the files. "Nothing seems to be missing."

"How can you be sure?" Henderson asked. "Go through them and find out for certain and let us know. Is there anything else in here that appears to have been disturbed?" "I think somebody's been messing with the computer," Lois said, uncertainly. "The monitor's at the wrong angle. And I always push the chair under the desk when I leave, since this room's so tiny, anyway. You weren't using it were you, Clark?"

"Not since yesterday morning."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I was busy all last evening, remember?"

"Do you suppose someone was trying to access our computer?" Lois asked.

"I guess they might try. They aren't going to get through the system of passwords, though," Clark said. "What do you suppose they wanted?"

"It looks like they were after your records," Henderson said. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

"I think that's obvious," Clark said. "But which records, and why?"

There didn't seem to be an answer to that. Clark turned toward the stairs and led the way onto the second floor. Upstairs, the mystery deepened. Nothing in their bedroom had been touched, but Lois gasped at the sight of CJ's room. It had been thoroughly ransacked, and Lois was willing to swear that his hairbrush was missing. At least it wasn't where she had left it, but in the light of the attempt to run Lois off the road the day before, Henderson seemed inclined to take the situation more seriously than he otherwise might have.

"Look," he said, finally, as they left the chaos that was now CJ's room, "you may have a stalker, or there might be something else going on here. I'd advise you to be especially careful of CJ's safety since there seems to be some special interest in him, judging by the condition of the nursery." His normally mournful expression deepened slightly. "There isn't much I can do at this point except advise you to be careful. If my people find anything we'll let you know." He glanced at the man who came to the foot of the stairs. "Anything, Winslow?"

"No, sir. Everything's been wiped clean."

Henderson sighed. "You two are trouble magnets, did you know that?"

Lois looked indignant. "But we didn't do anything this time!" Henderson gave her a sour smile. "You don't have to. You attract trouble without any effort at all. I'm going to tell the cruiser that covers your street to keep an eye out, just in case. We'll contact you if anything turns up."

"Thanks, Inspector," Clark said. "We really appreciate the trouble you're taking for us."

Henderson grunted. "Think nothing of it. I figure if I hang around with you two long enough, sooner or later I'll make the most spectacular arrest of the century and my career will be made. Maybe I'll run for senator or something and quit working for a living."

* * * * *

Lois called the day care center where CJ was currently enrolled to check on his safety, and to ask the staff to be especially alert. She was assured that they took every precaution with all of their charges, and Lois hung up, slightly reassured.

Back in the newsroom, a short time later, Clark worked on finishing his article covering the fire at the Stafford Building the night before and the tragic explosion that appeared to have claimed the life of prominent attorney Adrian Bender, while Lois concentrated on her own research concerning the situation she had been investigating which involved the Mayor and the City Council, and the possible misuse of city funds. She was slowly accumulating evidence which could cause a major embarrassment to the current city government, if it panned out. The Mayor's performance yesterday at the press conference hadn't convinced her of Her Honor's innocence in the least. She was just finishing a phone call with one of the witnesses when she saw Clark tilt his head with "that look" on his face. She brought the conversation to an end and glanced inquiringly at him.

He leaned over her chair. "Earthquake in Japan. I need to go."

"Go. I'll cover for you."

He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and strode quickly toward the stairs.

Lois read over the article on his computer, finished the last

paragraph, then LANned it to Perry, wondering again if, as she and Clark had already speculated, there was a connection between the fire in Bender's law office and the explosion of his car. Someone apparently wanted him dead. Of course, he **was** a lawyer, but even that wasn't a good reason for killing him. The mysterious "Project Doppelganger" might be behind it all, but what on earth could be so important about a project once engaged in by a defunct company?

A chill passed over her at a sudden thought. She and Clark had never considered the meaning of the word, "doppelganger". Could that have been the clone project? And, if so, was someone trying to resurrect it? They now knew that Lex had been directing operations from his prison cell the entire time he had been incarcerated at Stryker's Island. He had been in contact with Mamba, Asabi and other members of his organization, and directed the creation of the Lois clone, the clones of the President and the head of the Secret Service, as well as the two into which he had intended to shift himself and her in order to escape the law and Superman. Could someone from his organization have been behind this?

"Jimmy!" she called.

"Yeah?" Jimmy answered from behind her. He was holding a stack of files which appeared in imminent danger of collapsing onto the floor. "Can it wait just a minute?"

"Sure. Just come back right away. There's something I need you to do."

A few moments later she was issuing directions to Jimmy in typical Lois Lane style. "I need you to find out the whereabouts of Dr. Isaac Mamba--is he still in jail (I hope) and where--and Luthor's body servant, Asabi, and anyone else they tied in with that clone project. I think it was mostly Mamba, but there were one or two others involved in it, or so Clark said."

"Sure," Jimmy said. He looked doubtfully at her. "Are you all right, Lois?"

"Of course I'm all right. What makes you think I'm not?"

"Well, I mean, the clones. You had a pretty bad time with them, and, uh..." His voice trailed off as she fixed him with a hard stare.

"Jimmy, that was nearly two years ago--well, over a year and a half, anyway. This is about a story. I need the information, so get to it, will you?"

"Uh, sure." Jimmy gave her another worried look before he turned to obey. Lois glared at his retreating back for a moment. Wasn't she **ever** going to be allowed to forget that business?

She dug in the bottom drawer of her desk for a moment, muttering under her breath about interfering busybodies, a description which she knew underneath didn't really fit Jimmy at all; but just now it seemed as if that whole lousy incident was being dragged back to haunt her. Finally, she turned up one, lone double fudge crunch bar and ripped the wrapping off of it with vengeful fingers. A huge bite of the inoffensive candy bar made her feel better, however, and she

finished the chocolate with unladylike speed.

She was wiping her fingers on a tissue when the phone rang. Hurriedly, she dropped the chocolate-smeared item into the trash can and picked up the receiver. "Lois Lane."

There was no answer. Like the call last night, there was complete silence on the line. Lois frowned. "Hello?"

No answer; then suddenly there was sound, as if someone had released the mute button.

"Hello?" Lois said, again.

"Lois?" The word was whispered. Just the one word. Then, as suddenly, she was listening to a dial tone. The caller had hung up.

* * * * *

Lois put the phone down with a hand that was suddenly trembling. What was going on here? All these weird things had been happening to her in less than twenty-four hours. Did they really have a stalker, as Inspector Henderson suggested?

"Lois? What's the matter? You look like you've seen a ghost." Perry was standing beside her desk, looking down at her with concern.

"Oh, nothing." Lois made a face. "Another crank phone call."

"'Another' crank phone call? Has there been more than one?"

"Yeah." She debated for a moment. "There was one last night. And some car tried to run me off the road yesterday evening. Henderson thinks we might have a stalker."

"Judas Priest! Why didn't you tell me before?"

"What could you have done?" Lois shrugged. "Henderson's investigating."

Perry looked somewhat at a loss. "Yeah, well, Clark knows, doesn't he?" "Of course he knows, Chief. It was all I could do to get him to leave me by myself long enough for him to run to the grocery store last night. I'll be all right. Don't worry about it."

Perry clearly wasn't convinced, but he allowed the subject to drop. "Jimmy tells me you have him checking up on Luthor's old cloning buddies."

Lois tried to subdue a flash of irritation. "Why does everybody get worried when that subject comes up? Clark and I are running down leads on the fire in Adrian Bender's office last night, and the bomb that blew up his car, that's all. There might be a connection with a file the police think was stolen from his office and the old cloning experiments. Does that make everybody happy? Good. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to drop the matter of my involvement with the whole clone thing and get on with my job."

Perry held up his hands, placatingly. "Okay, okay. Sorry, honey. I won't say another word about it."

"Good." She took a breath. "Sorry, Perry. I don't mean to get mad, but all this weird stuff happening to us since last night has been a little upsetting. CJ was in the car with me when that nut tried to run me off the road, and somebody broke into our house this morning and searched his nursery. I'm more worried about him than anything else."

Her editor nodded. "I can understand that. I don't want anything happening to my godson, either. You know, I've said it before, if you ever need somebody to watch him for you, well, Alice and I would love to do it. There's nothin' she likes better than babies, and I was pretty good with a diaper pin in my day, too." He paused, then added, "And if you feel like you need to put him somewhere safe, sometime--just until this thing's cleared up, you know--well..."

"Thanks, Chief," Lois said. "Clark and I might take you up on that sooner than you think." She looked past him as Jimmy approached. "Did you find what I needed, Jimmy?"

"Some of it." Jimmy glanced at Perry with a worried look. "I don't think you're going to like it, though."

"What is it?"

"Well..." Jimmy set the printout he carried on her desk. "Asabi's got this little mysticism shop over on Birch Street. He was never even arrested. Nobody could prove he'd had anything to do with the clone thing. They didn't consider your statement to be convincing evidence." "Å'No kidding," she said, unhappily. "How about Superman?"

"Well, he never really saw Asabi, you know. Hearsay isn't considered admissible."

"Yeah, I know. I guess it never occurred to me to ask about him. I kind of had my mind on other things. How about the others?"

"The lab workers claimed they didn't really know what Mamba was up to, that he did all the high tech stuff, and that they didn't know Luthor was giving the orders. The charges were dropped."

"Of course," Lois said. "And Mamba? I hope he's still in prison, at least."

Jimmy shook his head. "Sorry. His lawyer got him out on a technicality, last May. He disappeared right after that. Nobody's seen him since."

"Why not?" She threw up her hands. "So everybody walked away scot-free. It figures."

"Well, except Luthor," Jimmy pointed out. "At least he got what he deserved."

"Not in my book," Perry said, with uncharacteristic venom. "If I'd had my way he'd have roasted over a slow fire. People like him never

get what they really deserve."

Lois felt her eyebrows rise. She'd had no idea Perry felt so strongly about Lex Luthor and his misdeeds. It made sense, though. Her editor had always been more like a father to her than her real one, and was more protective of her than anyone else, except Clark, sometimes to her vast annoyance. And, of course, there was what Luthor had tried to do to the Planet.

"It's probably just as well you didn't have your way, then," she said, lightly.

Perry gave an embarrassed grin. "Yeah. Well, better get back to work. You let me know if anything else weird happens, you hear?"

"Sure, Perry." She turned back to Jimmy. "See if you can track down Mamba. I don't like the fact that he's vanished like that, especially with this thing about Bender. He could be behind it. I'm going to try to get hold of Bobby Bigmouth, too, and see what he can find out." Å "Well, I'll try," Jimmy said. "Don't get your hopes up, though."

"Hey, look at that!" Lucille Evans's voice said, suddenly. The young intern was pointing at the newsroom monitors "Superman's in Japan!"

Lois turned to watch with the rest, and was rewarded with the sight of her husband carrying a young woman out of the wreckage of a building. The announcer was saying that this was a hospital in Kyoto, which seemed to be one of the main casualties of the quake. Amazingly enough, the hospital was one of only four structures that had received much damage, and that only to one wing. Lois hoped there wouldn't be many casualties, not only for the sake of the victims, but for Clark's as well. Clark might be virtually invulnerable physically, but emotionally it was another story. Superman's heart was surprisingly soft, and she suspected that being unable to help someone in need hurt him more than he would ever admit, even to her.

With a sigh, she turned back to her desk. She phoned Bobby Bigmouth, who promised to try to discover the whereabouts of Mamba, but told her that since his release from prison, upstate, there had been no word of him at all.

* * * * *

Since CJ had entered their lives, Lois had formed the habit of leaving work on time instead of staying until all hours, so she was ready to leave at four in the afternoon. She and Clark had been lobbying the people upstairs for a day care center in the Daily Planet building, itself, for several weeks now, but so far the powers-that-be had remained adamant. Lois figured that eventually they could be worn down, but in the meantime CJ spent his day at the Little Cherubs' Day Care Center. Lois couldn't imagine who had thought up such a name, but the staff was competent and genuinely loved children, so she and Clark, after researching just about every such facility in the vicinity of the Daily Planet, had chosen it for CJ. Now, she exited the Daily Planet's underground parking lot from the rear of the building and turned out onto the street.

It had been a stressful day, not so much in the physical sense, but emotionally--well, she didn't want to have to repeat it. Bobby Bigmouth called back, eventually, with the unsurprising news that no one he knew had a clue as to Mamba's whereabouts. Jimmy had come up as dry. And then the bouquet of a dozen, long-stemmed red roses arrived for her.

At first she had been pleased at the thought that Clark must have sent them. Only the writing on the card was not her husband's. It said merely, "Love", with no signature. Lois unhesitatingly threw the card into the trash and bestowed the roses on the fashion editor, to that lady's blank astonishment.

Now, as she turned left onto the side street, the thought of picking up CJ and heading for home to a hot bath and dinner was uppermost in her mind. At four months, their little boy was developing a noticeable personality and she found herself missing him during the time she was at work. He had dimples in his cheeks, exactly like Clark's when he smiled, and that toothless little grin was enough to evoke maternal feelings that she would never have believed she was capable of six months ago. Clark would probably be back this evening, too. The reports of the Kyoto earthquake were more reassuring than they had been earlier. Casualties were minimal, and Superman and the city emergency services apparently had gotten the situation well under control. She hoped it wouldn't be long before he got there. She was tired, and the thought of spending the evening alone, except for the baby, wasn't appealing--especially in the light of recent events.

She had gone no more than three blocks before she noticed the car that was following her.

She couldn't have said what made her notice; a sixth sense, maybe, but she knew it at once. It wasn't the grey sedan this time, but an old, green Chevy with a battered front license plate which, just providentially, happened to be smeared with mud. The driver was hanging back, but something about the way he drove drew her attention.

Lois turned left and watched. Sure enough, a minute later the green car rounded the corner. She gauged her speed, so as to go through the next traffic light as it turned yellow, and watched as the driver of the green car stepped on the gas in order beat the light. At the next intersection she turned right, and sure enough the green car did, too.

That was enough for her. Whether the tail was following her to learn where CJ's day care center was or for some other purpose, there was no way she would lead him to it. There was a gas station a short distance ahead and to the right. Lois pulled into it.

She didn't really need gas, but she went through the motions, and while the tank was filling up with the gallon or so of gas she called Perry on her cellular phone.

The phone rang six times before someone picked it up. "Daily Planet. Editor's desk."

"Bobby, it's Lois Lane. Get me Perry, right now. It's an emergency!"
"Well, gee--" The office intern sounded doubtful. "I don't know,

Ms. Lane. He's in a meeting."

"I don't care if he's having a conference with the President!" Lois used her "Mad Dog Lane" voice. It insured instant obedience on the part of any subordinate. "Get him *now*, or I guarantee you'll be in Classifieds for the rest of your professional life! This is an emergency!"

Perry was on the phone less than a minute later. "Lois? Why are you scarin' the pants off of poor Bobby?"

"Perry? Thank God! I've got an emergency. I'm being followed."

"Followed!" Perry was suddenly all business. "Who is it?"

"I don't know." Lois risked a glance out of the corner of her eye at the green car. It was impossible to get a look at the driver at this distance. "Look, I can ditch this guy, but I don't want to risk him following me to CJ's day care center. Can you pick him up for me?"

"No trouble at all." Perry sounded grim. "I'll have Jimmy meet you at the brownstone with him. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine if you'll pick up CJ."

"Don't worry about him. You take care of your end and I'll take care of mine."

"Thanks, Perry. I owe you one." Satisfied, she shut off the phone and set the gas nozzle back in its holder, refused the pump computer's attempt to sell her a car wash, and replaced the gas cap. A moment later, she pulled out of the station and proceeded to drive at a modest pace to the headquarters of the Metropolis Police Department. As she got out of the Jeep, the green car drove past her and disappeared up the street.

When she arrived at the townhouse, Jimmy was waiting for her in his car, with CJ. She breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Perry, who was on the list of persons allowed to pick CJ up from day care, had done just as she'd asked.

"Hi, Lois." The young photographer got out of the car. "Everything go okay?"

"Yeah. I drove by the MPD and filed another report. He took off like a rabbit when he saw where I was going." Å "Did you get a look at him?"

She shook her head. "Not enough of one. I think it might have been the same guy, though. Hat, sunglasses, a brown beard and mustache. It's got to be a disguise, but I haven't a clue who it might be."

Jimmy boosted the baby out of the car seat and settled him on his hip. "Here you go, kiddo. You're getting cuter every day. Man, he sure looks like CK, Lois. I know he was a private adoption. Do you know his parents?"

"Um, a relative of Clark's, Jimmy." She gave him the story she and Clark had worked out to explain his sudden appearance to their friends and acquaintances. "A teenage mother who couldn't keep him."

"Oh, I get it. I think it's pretty great that you guys took him."

"We wanted him, Jimmy. Clark's always wanted kids, and the idea sort of grew on me, too. I wouldn't want to do without CJ, now." Lois checked the front door carefully for signs of entry. "Let's go check the back, okay? I want to be sure nobody's there before we go in."

"Good idea." Jimmy obediently followed her around to the back of the townhouse, toting CJ.

The house showed no sign of forced entry, so Lois let them in through the kitchen door. Jimmy carried CJ into the living room, laid him on the mattress of his play pen and moved the bright colored mobile within his reach. The baby gurgled and swung at the baubles hanging over him. Jimmy grinned. "Bright little guy."

"We think so," Lois agreed. She sank onto the couch, suddenly feeling very tired. Jimmy looked at her with a worried frown.

"Lois, would you like me to stay for awhile? I don't mind."

The temptation was too strong. Lois Lane, independent career woman, gave in. "Sure, Jimmy. I'd appreciate that. Clark should be here pretty soon." At least she hoped he would. "Are you hungry?"

"Well, kind of, " Jimmy said. Lois correctly interpreted his expression.

"Oh, don't worry, Jimmy. Clark made some stuff and froze it for days when there wasn't any time to cook."

Jimmy grinned. "In that case, sure." "I'll feed CJ in about an hour. He always wants to eat about six, for some reason. This won't take any time at all." Lois went into the kitchen, extracted one of Clark's frozen meals from the freezer and set it in the oven. She was just setting the temperature when the phone rang. Quickly, she punched in the time and went to answer.

"Hello?" Remembering this afternoon, she braced herself for another dead phone, but instead a comforting voice with a southern accent came over the line.

"Lois? Just checking to be sure everything was all right."

"It is, Perry. I went by the MPD and whoever it was drove off. Jimmy was waiting for me when I got here. Thanks for the help."

"No problem, honey. If you need anything later, call my cell phone. I'm pickin' Alice up for dinner in awhile, so I won't be home."

"Thanks, Perry. I don't think I'll need to interrupt your date."

"Don't you worry about that. If anything happens that I can help with, you call! That's an order!"

She couldn't repress a giggle. "Aye aye, sir!"

"Good. I'll talk to you later."

Perry's call left her feeling better. She went into the living room, to discover that Jimmy had turned on the TV and was watching the tail end of a baseball game that had gone into extra innings. CJ was industriously sucking on a fist, making loud, slurping noises. Maybe she'd better get a bottle ready for him, just in case, she thought.

Jimmy glanced around, looking worried. "Everything all right? That wasn't one of those weird calls again, was it?"

"No, it was Perry, checking to be sure things were okay. What's the score?"

"Huh? Oh, it's 2-2. The Metros are up. The game's in the eleventh inning."

The phone rang again and Lois went to answer it, hearing Jimmy mutter something about "Grand Central Station". She picked it up.

"Hello?" Å Dead silence. Lois froze in place, listening. The silence continued for several seconds, and in sudden fury she slammed it down.

Jimmy half rose to his feet. "Lois?"

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "It was him."

"Yeah, I kind of figured that." Jimmy's face had gone pink with anger. "What a sicko! I'll bet he wouldn't be so tough if CK got hold of him!"

"I'm sure he wouldn't," Lois said.

"Well, I'm not CK, but if anybody tries to get in here, he's going to have to go through me," Jimmy said.

Lois had a sudden, wild desire to giggle, but suppressed it for fear of hurting her young friend's feelings. Instead, she walked to the play pen and picked CJ up. The baby waved his arms and kicked vigorously, then reached for her earrings. She gently restrained the pudgy little hands and shook her head.

"I don't think he'll dare," she said. "So far he's been sneaking around. He hasn't tried anything face to face."

The phone rang once more. Lois caught her breath and she and Jimmy both stared at the instrument. The answering machine cut in after four rings, gave it's spiel and beeped.

Nothing. After a few seconds, the machine clicked off.

"Him again," Jimmy said.

"I guess so." She turned her head at the faintest "whoosh-thump" on the patio and felt suddenly better. Clark was home.

A moment later he was knocking on the front door. "Lois, it's me!"

Jimmy undid the chain. "Sorry, CK. We locked up everything. We think that guy tried to follow Lois to CJ's day care center."

"Are you okay?" Clark looked immediately at Lois, who stood behind Jimmy, holding the baby.

"Yeah." She tilted her face up for him to kiss her, while Jimmy closed the door behind him. "Perry and Jimmy helped me out." She filled him in on the trick they had used. Clark listened without comment until she had finished.

"Good job," he said, finally. "Thanks, Jimmy."

"No sweat, CK. I just want to see this slimeball caught. He called twice just before you got here, and once at the office."

"And sent me flowers," Lois said. "It's getting pretty creepy. If he's after CJ, we've got to come up with a way to catch him."

"It sounds like he's interested in CJ *and* Lois," Jimmy said.

"Yeah, I'd kind of sensed that," Lois said, dryly. "Look, I've got one of your casseroles in the oven, Clark, and Jimmy's invited for dinner. Let's eat. Maybe we can think better after that."

"Sounds good to me." Clark picked CJ neatly out of Lois's arms and held him at eye level. "How's my pal this evening?"

CJ gurgled at him, swiping at his glasses. Clark neatly evaded the baby's tiny fingers and supplied him with his keys instead. "Here, buddy, why don't you play with these for a bit, while Mommy and Daddy have something to eat?"

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Lois asked, as she slammed the Jeep's door.

"Fine. The staff was a little surprised to have Superman drop CJ off, but since he's on the approved list nobody said anything."

"At least we know you weren't followed." Lois pushed the button to summon the elevator to the parking lot level.

"Were *you*?" he asked.

"I don't know. I didn't see anyone, but that doesn't mean anything."

"True." He put his arm protectively around her waist.

"Clark, this can't go on. We have to do something."

"I agree. It might not be a bad idea to send CJ for a visit--say to the Midwest. Just until we catch this guy. And, you know, you could go along." "Not for one minute, Kent! I'm going to be here when we nail this weirdo. Count on it. Your mom and dad will take good care of CJ for a few days. Why don't you give them a call when we get up to the newsroom?"

Clark hadn't expected anything else, but he had to try. The elevator chimed its arrival on Lois's last word. The doors opened and they boarded in silence, both immersed in their own thoughts. Clark's were on Lois. She was looking tired and stressed, he thought. She would never admit it to anyone, of course, but he had been noticing it for a couple of days now. This business was getting to her more than she was willing to let on to him. He made a silent promise to himself that he would catch this person, whoever he was. His family's welfare was not something he was willing to allow anyone to compromise. Whoever was harassing his wife and son was going to have Superman to cope with.

Lois was looking up at him, a little smile on her face. She put an arm around him and gave him a hug. "Lighten up, Clark. You're looking too much like Superman to walk out into the newsroom like that. It's going to be okay."

"I know. Together we can do anything." He bent down to kiss her, and thus was unaware when the doors opened until the whistles and cheers of the spectators alerted them to the fact that they had arrived. Perry, only a few feet away, shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to hide a grin.

"Come on, you two. This is a newsroom, not the honeymoon suite. You've got work to do."

Clark found himself smiling, with a hint of embarrassment, but Lois was unruffled as they exited the elevator. "When we get finished with our honeymoon, we'll let you know, Chief."

"Yeah, well, conduct it on your own time." Their boss flicked Clark a wink. "How did things go yesterday? Everything all right?"

"Yeah. Thanks for the help, Chief."

"Glad I could," Perry said. "Still, it looks to me that you're going to have to do something more. He doesn't seem to be givin' up."

"We've already talked about it," Clark said. "The plan goes into effect this evening."

"Good." Perry followed them down the ramp. "In that case, what have you got goin' this morning?" "Clark snagged a plain cake doughnut off the snack table and took a bite. "We've got that City Council meeting in awhile. Lois has got all of her evidence documented and the witnesses lined up. There's going to be some red faces at City Hall when this comes out."

"Serves 'em right," Perry said, with a grin. "I thought this batch was sleazy, but even *I* never expected them to sink this low. It may even get a few of 'em booted, come the next election."

"Well, any decent person should be outraged," Lois said. "I mean, first they commit the city to buying tickets for any seats that don't sell to the Metros' games, and promise to donate them to underprivileged kids, then we find out they're giving them out to influential people for political favors. Less than half the tickets are going where they're supposed to go. That's not only misappropriation of funds, it's just plain shameful!" She marched over to her desk and snapped on her computer.

Perry gave Clark a one-sided smile. "Those guys have no idea what's gonna hit 'em," he said. "Mad Dog Lane's on the warpath, and some political heads are gonna roll." Clark chuckled at the mixed metaphor and nodded in full agreement.

A few minutes later he set Lois's morning cup of coffee on her desk and dropped into his own chair. While his computer booted up, he scanned the messages that had been left for him since the day before. And almost jumped out of his skin at the crash when Lois's mug hit the floor. He was out of his seat like a shot. "Lois, are you all right?"

The look on her face answered him. She was staring at her computer screen in apparent shock.

"Lois?" He bent quickly over her. "What's wrong?"

"Look at this." She pointed at the screen.

The e-mail was short and to the point. It said simply, "Clark Kent does not love you. He is unfaithful. Leave him."

Perry was standing behind him, reading over his shoulder. Clark hadn't even heard him approach. Their boss's face darkened to an alarming shade of red. "What *is* this garbage?"

"It's *him* again," Lois said.

Clark took her hand in a tight grip. "Honey, you *know* none of that is true."

Lois glanced up with a half-smile, but he was frightened at the drawn look on her face. "Of course I know it, Clark. But I can't seem to get away from him. He's always there in the background, somehow." Abruptly, her expression altered to the determined look he knew. "But that doesn't mean I have to take it. We're going to get this sicko if it's the last thing we do!"

"That's the Lois Lane I know." Clark squeezed her hand in relief.

"You can count on it." Perry's face had resumed its normal color, but he still looked grim. "Olsen! Drop what you're doin' and get over here now!"

"Just bringing the doughnuts, Chief." Jimmy skidded to a stop by the desk.

"I'll take 'em. Ten to one this e-mail address is a fake. Can you trace it?"

"I don't know." Jimmy peered at Lois's computer screen. "I can try. It's that creep again, huh?"

"Yeah. Get busy and track him down!"

Jimmy gave Clark a pained expression, but nodded. "I'll do my best."

* * * * *

Four hours later, Lois and Clark returned to the Daily Planet from City Hall. They had asked several awkward questions and received a number of unsatisfactory explanations for the events in question. Lois had apparently accepted every word at face value, and planned to print each answer, word for word, with the rest of her article and allow the readers to make up their own minds. Clark suspected the result might make for some interesting drama in government during the next couple of months.

Lois pulled into the Planet's underground lot slowly, glancing around for a parking space. Clark lifted his glasses. "There's one two aisles over that way," he was beginning, when something struck them hard from the rear, jolting them forward several feet. Clark twisted about, to see the minivan which had just tail-ended them, the driver looking very shaken. He turned quickly to his wife.

"Lois, are you okay?" he demanded. "Are you hurt?" Å' "No, I think I'm all right." Lois winced and rubbed the back of her neck. Clark lifted his glasses and surreptitiously x-rayed the spot. He grimaced slightly. Lois was going to have a very sore neck by tonight, but none of the damage was serious. He got out of the car and went back to the other driver.

"Are you hurt?"

The man started to shake his head, and groaned. "I think I'm all right. Are you guys okay?"

"I think so. What happened?"

"My foot slipped off the brake. Blast it! My insurance company's gonna have a fit! I just got my van back. Some guy tail-ended *me* six weeks ago!"

Lois had gotten out and was examining the back of her beloved Jeep. Clark and the other driver exchanged insurance and driver's license information, and the other man eventually drove away, amid profuse apologies. Clark noted that Lois remained silent during the exchange, but her jaw had a grim set to it. He turned to her after the man had disappeared.

"Are you sure you're okay, honey?"

"Haven't you already checked?" she asked, a sarcastic note to her voice. Clark smiled slightly.

"Your neck's going to be sore tonight, but I didn't see any serious damage. Look, why don't you go on up to the newsroom and sit down? I'll take care of the tow truck. We aren't going to be driving the

Jeep for awhile by the looks of it. That back wheel well is pretty much crushed."

"No kidding! That *idiot*! Where did he get his license? Out of a crackerjack box?" Abruptly she swore, using language that he had rarely heard from her. He could see that she was near tears and put his arms around her.

"It'll be all right, Lois. It's not the end of the world, and it wasn't your fault. It's just a little inconvenience."

She sighed. "Oh, I know. It's just that it had to happen *now*, of all times, with all these other things happening, too."

He kissed her, gently. "At least you aren't hurt seriously. That's all IÅ'care about. The car can be fixed."

It took a little more persuading, but at last she stepped into the elevator and it proceeded upward. Clark took the cellular phone from his jacket pocket.

A tremendous explosion shook the building, knocking him back several feet. He picked himself up, ears ringing. The Jeep had exploded, he realized with a shock. The remainder of their vehicle lay on its side, little flames licking at the frame. The cars on both sides of it were blackened, the water fountain by the elevators torn completely off the wall, and water was spraying from the broken pipes. The doors of the elevator had been blown away. So had his clothes. He was in his Superman outfit.

"Lois!" Instantly he x-rayed the elevator car, and breathed a sigh of relief. The car was stalled, and Lois was trapped between floors, but she wasn't hurt. Without hesitation, he dived into the shaft and zipped up to open the car from the top. In an instant he was holding her tightly in his arms. "Honey, are you hurt?"

"What happened?" Lois sounded slightly dazed.

"The Jeep exploded. It may have been a car bomb." He lowered them down the elevator shaft once more. "Stay back, okay? Don't get too close. There might be more explosions."

He set her down, and turned his head, x-raying first the other elevators, which were, fortunately, empty, and then the building. Incredibly, except for the area immediately around the Jeep, there wasn't much damage. Two steel beams were cracked, and he proceeded to weld them into place with his heat vision, then extinguished the remaining flames licking at their Jeep with a blast of icy breath. He grimaced at the sight of their shattered vehicle. No one was ever going to be driving that again. The Cherokee was a total loss. Sirens were approaching fast; someone must have called the police. He glanced at his wife. She was leaning against one of the undamaged cars, looking more pale and shaken than he liked. He went over to her.

"Honey, are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm all right, Clark."

He wasn't so sure, but at that point the first police car came

screaming into the parking lot, followed by two more, and he had to put on his "Superman face" as Lois called it. Jimmy Olsen and Ralph appeared a few minutes later, and the opportunity for intimate conversation was lost.

* * * * *

"There's no doubt of it, Clark." Henderson's voice sounded grim. "The bomb was placed under your car. There was a radio-controlled trigger. We found enough of it to be sure."

"So it was triggered manually."

"Yeah. Whoever was responsible waited until they figured Lois was out of range, hit the switch and ran like the devil. It was a deliberate attempt to kill you."

"Well, it was pretty obvious he intended to kill somebody. If Superman hadn't shown up when he did, it would have worked," Clark said. He glanced around the newsroom at his co-workers, and at his wife. Superman had assured the authorities that the building was structurally sound and safe for occupancy, and they had taken his word for it, so the work around him was proceeding at a hectic pace. Lois was typing away at her keyboard, pausing every now and then to rub her neck. Clark subdued a wave of anger at their mysterious stalker who was so willing to risk the lives of all these people, and especially of Lois. He couldn't have been certain that she was out of range of the explosion.

"Are you listening to me, Clark?" Inspector Henderson's voice asked.

"Yeah," Clark said. "Thanks, Inspector. Look, I'd appreciate any information you come up with on this. I promise not to print anything without permission."

"I know you won't. Look, there *is* one thing you should probably know. I know you're investigating the Bender case. The explosive that blew up his car is quite possibly the same type used on yours. Don't quote me on that."

"I won't."

"You watch yourself," Henderson said, with uncharacteristic concern. "Whoever this head case is, he may have taken his obsession with your wife to the next level."

"I'd kind of gathered that," Clark said. "If I find out anything, I'll get in touch with you, Inspector. Thanks."

Henderson hung up, and Clark put down the phone slowly. He walked over to Lois, rested his hands on her shoulders and began to gently rub her neck, which he knew from the way she was acting must already be aching. A few darts of heat vision into the stiffening muscles helped to ease her discomfort as he rubbed. He could see her tense shoulders relaxing.

"That feels good, Clark," she murmured. "Thanks."

"No problem," he said. "How are you feeling, besides the neck?"

She leaned back in her chair, enjoying the neck rub. "All right. A little shaken up, but all right."

"Good," he said. "I was kind of worried there for awhile. How about dinner at Antonio's after I drop CJ off, tonight?"

"That sounds like heaven." Lois looked up at him and he bent down to kiss her lightly on the lips.

"Uh, guys?" Jimmy's voice, as might have been expected, interrupted the kiss.

Clark straightened up and glanced at their young friend in resignation. "Nice timing, Jim."

"Sorry." Jimmy had turned slightly pink. "Look, you know that e-mail from this morning? The Chief was right; it was a fake return address. I tried to follow it, but it was mirrored through several servers and somewhere along the line I lost the trace. I'm sorry."

Clark sighed. "That's all right, Jimmy. You did your best. I guess we'll just have to do this the old fashioned way."

"Yeah. It just burns me up that this guy is getting away with all this. I mean, he tried to *kill* you, CK!"

"I know. I guess I'm lucky Superman was keeping his eye on me."

Lois's desk phone chose that moment to ring. She picked it up. "Lois Lane." Both men paused, alert, remembering the calls of the previous night. Lois listened a moment, and her face whitened. She slammed down the phone.

"The day care center is on fire!"

If he hadn't known it was impossible, Jimmy might later have sworn that both Lois and Clark had flown out of the newsroom, they disappeared so fast. Clark hoped no one had noticed the speed with which he moved them both out, or the gust of wind that blew papers around the room as soon as they were out of everyone's sight. Within a few seconds they were landing in front of the Little Cherubs' Day Care Center. Superman set Lois down on the lawn and entered the building in a blur.

The main room was full of smoke, but the staff was acting swiftly and efficiently to evacuate the children. He moved quickly to locate the source of the fire, a trash can in the kitchen stuffed with oily rags and papers, soaked in some kind of chemical. It was pouring out a cloud of dense smoke, but one blast of super-cooled breath froze the contents solid. Once the fire itself was out he proceeded to clear the building of smoke. As he dispersed the worst of the cloud he heard the sirens of the approaching fire trucks cut off in front of the Center. A moment later a fire fighter opened the kitchen door. "Superman?"

"Yeah. Check this out, will you?" Superman didn't bother to try to explain why he had shown up so quickly at what was, to say the least, a minor fire. He thrust the trash can at the woman. "It looks like it

was deliberate."

She took the receptacle, and she and the two men who had followed her through the door began to examine the frozen offering. But Superman's attention was no longer on them. A day care worker's voice said, sharply, "Where's CJ?"

For an instant terror tugged at him, then he was responding in the way he had trained himself to do in all emergencies, with cool, methodical judgement. He fanned his x-ray vision about the building, looking for his son. CJ was not on the premises. In a gust of air, he was outside and lifting off, using his enhanced eyesight to scan the whole area.

A grey car was driving away from the scene a little too fast for his taste, and he x-rayed it. There was CJ, lying loose on the front seat. He arrowed down, and an instant later the car was suspended in mid air, fifty feet from the ground, carefully tilted backward to protect the child on the passenger seat. Superman, supporting the vehicle with one hand under the top edge of the window frame, fingers leaving dents in the metal of the roof, reached through the opening and scooped up his son.

The driver gave one panicky look at him and tried to open his door.

"I wouldn't," Clark said, dryly. "Unless you can fly."

The man looked down and swallowed, then back at the Kryptonian holding his car casually in one hand as he gently cradled the baby in the other arm. Clark's eyes met those of the kidnapper with an expression in them that would terrify the hardiest of souls. "I don't suppose you'd care to explain what you thought you were doing," he said, almost mildly, but the apparent mildness was his own way of covering the jolt of recognition. The driver was the same man who had tail-ended their Jeep this morning.

Clark glanced down. He could see Lois in the crowd, and knew she had seen him. He looked back at the driver, and the next words he spoke caused the man's face to go even paler than it already had.

"Do you know what will happen to you if I let go of this car?"

The other man nodded, jerkily.

"Good. Then don't give me any reason to be distracted. Do we understand each other?"

Again that shaky nod. Superman smiled without humor, and with a burst of speed, he headed for MPD Headquarters to hand his prize over to Inspector Henderson. Maybe now they would get some answers.

* * * * *

"His name is Robert Harris," Clark was saying as he and Lois, carrying CJ, entered the Daily Planet a couple of hours later. "He had no idea who it was that hired him. The description he gave matches the driver of the car that tried to run you off the road--brown hair, a mustache and a short beard. Our kidnapper says he's about my height, but slimmer, and he wore sunglasses. Not a lot

of help, I'm afraid. He was hired to do that job on us this morning, and to kidnap CJ, but he'd never seen the man before a couple of days ago. He was apparently paid cash--five thousand up front, and another five thousand to be paid when the job was completed. They were supposed to meet right afterwards, but of course whoever it was must have realized pretty fast that something had gone wrong. He may even have been watching, because he wasn't at the meeting place when I checked, half an hour later."

"Not your ordinary stalker." Lois was trying hard to keep her voice cool and steady, but Clark could hear the roughness underneath. This incident had shaken her far more than she would ever willingly admit.

"No. I wish I could figure out what's behind this." He kept an arm tightly around her in what he knew to be a futile gesture of protection, but he couldn't help it. His family was threatened, and the need to defend them was almost overpowering. It had been all he could do, a couple of hours ago, to restrain the urge to seize his son's kidnapper by the throat and demand an explanation for the reign of terror they had been enduring for the past three days. It probably wouldn't have done any good, but it would have been immensely satisfying.

The elevator deposited them on the newsroom floor, and Clark saw at once that a new trial awaited his harried wife. Ellen Lane was sitting beside Lois's desk, obviously waiting for them.

She saw them at nearly the same instant Clark saw her, and rose to her feet, almost knocking the chair over. The origin of his wife's babble gene was instantly obvious.

"There you are!" she said, her voice trembling on the edge of hysteria, as they descended the ramp toward her. "I've been waiting here for hours for you! Where have you been? The most terrifying thing happened to me when I got home from Gena's this afternoon! I tried to call you, but they said you were out! Of course you'd be out! You're never here when I need help, and I needed help desperately, so I came over to wait for you. Your father was in his lab and not taking any calls, not even from me. I'm going to talk to him about that receptionist of his. She wouldn't listen to a thing I said about it being an emergency, and..."

"Mother!" Lois broke in on the monologue, since it seemed to be in danger of straying far afield from the original subject. "What happened?"

Brought up short, Ellen seemed to take in the fact that her grandson was present. "Oh, hello, darling! How's Grandma's little angel today?"

CJ, hearing his grandmother's familiar voice, responded with a wide smile. Ellen batted her eyes at him. "Ooh, Sweetie, you're growing so fast! You know, Lois," she added, in quite another voice, "I don't get to see him nearly as much as I'd like..."

Clark intercepted the new topic before it became established. "I'm sorry we weren't here, Ellen. We had an emergency. What's the trouble?"

"Oh! Well, I got home from Gena's--she's my neighbor down the hall, who just moved in last week--and the front door of my apartment had been pried open! Well, whoever it was was gone, and nothing was taken except a picture, but they turned the apartment upside down! And I tried to get hold of you, but--"

"*What* picture was taken?" Lois interrupted. Å'"The one you gave me that Clark took of you holding CJ in front of his new day care center. I can't imagine why anyone would have taken it, but it's gone, and my nerves have been completely shattered by this whole, horrible affair. It's so violating to know that your own home has been invaded by some complete stranger, and all your things pawed over..."

Clark let Ellen ramble on as he and Lois exchanged a glance. That explained a lot. Their stalker had failed to discover CJ's day care center by following Lois, so he had shifted his approach to Lois's mother. They should have thought of that sooner.

"Are you listening to me?" Ellen demanded.

"Of course, Ellen." Clark took her arm and guided her back to her chair. "I'm sure it was a pretty frightening experience. Would you like me to come over tomorrow and put new locks on your doors?"

That brought her up short. "Why, that's very nice of you to offer, Clark. I could never depend on Sam for things that needed maintenance around the house. I remember--"

"Lois! Clark!" Perry's bellow cut through the noise of the busy newsroom. "In my office! Now!"

Clark nudged his wife. "You go ahead, Lois. I'll be right there."

"Okay." Lois threw him a puzzled glance, but cooperated. "I'll call you, Mother. We'll have to talk about this later." She headed for Perry's office. Clark glanced after her, then turned to Ellen.

"Lois is pretty upset right now, Ellen" he said, quietly. "I didn't want to bring it up in front of her, but there was an attempt to kidnap CJ from his day care center a little while ago. Superman prevented it, but I suspect the break-in at your apartment may have been how the kidnapper found out where he was."

"Oh, my god..."

"No, it's all right," Clark said. "You saw CJ, and he's okay, but I'm really concerned about Lois. I want to be sure she goes home and gets some rest, and she won't if she's worried about you. I don't want anything to happen to you, either." He gave her his most charming smile.

"What do you want me to do?" Ellen asked. "I'd do anything for Lois, even though she doesn't believe it. I--"Å'"I think she does," Clark said. "I'd feel a lot better about your safety, myself, if you were at Sam's tonight rather than your own place. I promise I'll come over tomorrow and personally install new locks on your doors. I'd do it

tonight, but there's a few things in connection with this situation that I simply have to get done."

Ellen nodded in a businesslike way and stood up. "You're right, Clark. I'll do it. Tell Lois not to worry about me, all right?"

"Thanks, Ellen. I knew I could count on you," Clark said. "Now I'd better get in there before Perry takes my head off."

Clark entered Perry's office a minute later. Lois stared at him in astonishment. "How did you get rid of her so quickly?"

Clark grinned. "Just because you can't handle your mother doesn't mean I can't. She's going to stay at your father's tonight. I think she'll be safer there, and I'll go over and fix her doors for her tomorrow. Now, what did you need, Chief?"

"What happened, Clark? Lois said someone tried to kidnap CJ?"

"Yeah. Superman stopped him." Clark reached out to stroke their son's cheek with one, large finger. "He took the kidnapper to Henderson, but it wasn't our stalker. The stalker may have hired him."

"Judas Priest! What are you going to do now?"

"Superman has some friends who are going to take care of CJ for us for a few days--just until this is cleared up."

"I think that's a good idea. You can investigate the business a whole lot better if you don't have to worry about him." Perry looked a little reassured. "I want you to drop anything less important and concentrate on this psycho, whoever he is. I'm going to reassign your stories temporarily--except the City Council thing," he added hastily, as Lois opened her mouth. "But right now I think you should go on home for the day. It's almost quitting time, anyway. You look like you could both use it."

Quitting time? Two hours early? Clark didn't comment. Perry wasn't the editor of the Daily Planet because he was stupid, after all. He must have noticed how rough this whole day had been on Lois, and it was also noticeable that Lois didn't argue. Her neck must be sorer than a bad tooth right now, Clark thought. Å' They took off from the roof. If anyone was thinking about following Lois or CJ anywhere else Clark didn't intend to give him the chance, although it seemed likely that their stalker would try some other approach now that his little kidnapping scheme had gone awry. If they could only figure out the reason behind this it might help, he thought. There must be something they were missing--that, or the guy was just plain nuts.

At home, Lois packed a bag for CJ. Neither liked the idea of sending him away but they both knew that his safety was the most important thing right now, and neither Lois nor Clark was in any doubt that Martha and Jonathan would be completely delighted with the opportunity to have their small grandson all to themselves for a few days. In fact, Martha had said as much that morning when Clark called her to explain. When dusk fell, Superman took off, carrying his all-important burden, headed for Kansas, and Lois made a beeline for the bathtub and a long, hot soak.

She had been half-drowsing in the deliciously warm water for nearly forty-five minutes when the phone rang. Half awake, she fumbled for the handset. As of this morning, Henderson had a tap on the phone. If their stalker called, and she could keep him on the line for a few vital seconds, they might be able to trace the call to its source.

"Hello?"

"Hello," a slightly nervous voice on the other end said. "May I speak to Mr. Clark Kent, please?"

Instantly, Lois was wide awake. "He just stepped out for a moment," she said, cautiously. "This is his wife. May I help you?"

The only sound on the other end was the click of the receiver.

Thoroughly awake now, Lois climbed slowly out of the tub and reached for a towel. The hot water had loosened her stiff muscles, and she felt better, physically, but that phone call...

At least it wasn't their stalker, even if he *had* hung up on her.

She dressed carefully. Clark had promised to take her to Antonio's when he returned, and she was certainly ready for a nice break, a quiet dinner with her husband, and a little peace and quiet. She hoped he would be back soon.

The phone rang again. Again she picked up the handset. "Hello?"

Silence. It was him. She licked lips suddenly gone dry. "Hello?" she repeated.

The blank deadness was replaced by background sounds a little too muffled for her to identify. "Hello?" she said again, more loudly. "Who is this?"

"He doesn't love you, Lois." The whisper was chillingly familiar, and yet completely strange. "Leave him. I've missed you."

"Who are you?" she shouted. "What do you want? Leave us alone!"

There was no answer, except a dial tone. He was gone again.

Slowly, she set down the handset.

In a gust of air, Superman was beside her. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"That was him on the phone again," Lois said. "I don't know if he stayed long enough for Henderson to do a trace. Oh, and you had a call. He wouldn't talk to me."

Clark frowned. "That's odd. Well, if it's important he'll call back." He stepped back, deliberately looked her up and down, and

wolf-whistled. "Wow! Give me a few seconds to get a shower and change and we're off to Antonio's. I made reservations before we left work."

* * * * *

Lois awoke the next morning with Clark gently shaking her shoulder. "Honey, it's seven o'clock. Time to get up."

"*Seven*! We're late!"

"No, we're not. I called Perry and told him you were sleeping in this morning. He thought it was a good idea. Go ahead and get ready while I make breakfast."

"Honestly, Clark, I'm not made of glass!"

"I know that. But you were in an accident yesterday, and I know you're still sore all over. Go on. A hot shower will feel good."

She made a face at him. "You're so smug when you're right."

The phone rang, cutting off his reply. Lois froze for a second. The ringing of the phone was becoming an unpleasant experience. Clark picked it up. "Hello? Oh, Dr. Klein! What can I do for you?"

Lois relaxed. At least a call from Dr. Klein was safe. She slid her feet into their bedroom slippers and reached for her robe. Clark's next words brought her to a full stop.

"You had a break-in? What happened?"

Lois scrambled across the bed, picked up the handset and pressed it to her ear.

"...Need you to get hold of Superman," Dr. Klein was saying. "Whoever it was tried to get into the Kryptonite vault. Actually, they *did* get into the vault. Fortunately, we'd moved everything into the new high-security vault last month, so he didn't get anything. Still..."

"I'll pass the word to Superman," Clark promised. "Did your security cameras get any pictures?"

"No, nothing. They were all damaged, somehow. We found traces of arcing in the circuit card assemblies consistent with an emp, although we have no idea how it could have been done..."

"Dr. Klein, in English, please," Clark said.

"Sorry." The scientist cleared his throat. "Basically, the electronics of the cameras were all fried simultaneously, with something like an electromagnetic pulse. We're trying to reverse engineer it to try to recreate the technology, but so far..." He paused, and said in quite a different voice, "We haven't a clue how they did it."

"Sounds like some kind of military weapon," Lois said. The thought of

Bureau 39 popped instantly into her head. Could they be behind this?

"Maybe," Dr. Klein said. "Anyway, I thought Superman should know."

"You did the right thing," Clark told him. "I'll be sure he gets the word."

When Dr. Klein had hung up, Lois voiced her idea. Clark frowned, considering it. "I suppose it's possible, but we haven't heard from Bureau 39 since Trask was killed."

"But it *could* be." ÅHe sighed. "Yeah, it could be. We certainly can't rule it out. There's something I want to check on when we get to the office, though. Go and get your shower. I'll make breakfast."

* * * * *

There were two messages waiting on Lois's desk when they got to the Daily Planet. One was from their insurance company which promised to have a substitute vehicle available for them by this afternoon, as soon as the paperwork was processed. The other was from her mother.

She called Ellen back, but got no answer either at her mother's apartment or from her father's. Clark was also on the phone, and she saw him frown. After a moment he put down the receiver and turned to her. "Well, that was enlightening. Sort of."

"What was?"

"That was my source in the Coroner's Office. They left me a message. You remember, they were trying to identify Bender's body positively, for the insurance company?"

"I remember. Have they identified him?"

"No. They have no idea who it is, but they know who it *isn't*. Adrian Bender had three gold crowns and a bridge. This guy didn't have anything but a couple of silver fillings."

"So Bender isn't dead!"

"Well, he isn't the person who was in the car when it exploded, anyway."

"Then who on Earth..."

Clark shook his head. "I don't know, but I've got an idea. Let me check a couple of things. What did your Mom want?"

"I couldn't get hold of her. I'm sure she'll call back."

"Probably. I have to go over this afternoon and replace her locks. Shouldn't take long." He turned back to his desk and picked up the phone again. Lois brought her attention to her own computer, and began putting the finishing touches on her City Council expose. The Honorable Mayor was not going to be happy with her, and neither were

a lot of city councilmen, but that was just too bad.Å'Half an hour later, Clark set a cup of cafe latte on the desk next to her hand. "Here. Thought you could use the pick-me-up."

"Thanks." She sat back, stretching, and rubbed the back of her neck. It was aching again, and she reached automatically for the aspirin. "Did you find out anything?"

"Yeah." He moved behind her to give her one of his magic neck-rubs. "There's been a string of car thefts in Bender's section of town in the last two weeks. It's possible the thief got more than he bargained for this time."

"Sounds like it," Lois said. "That feels good, Clark. So, I guess we can assume Bender is probably alive somewhere and hiding out?"

"Well, somebody *did* try to kill him. If he has any idea why, he might decide to go into hiding."

"Do you think it might have anything to do with that empty folder? 'Project Doppelganger'?"

"It could. I'd sure like to talk to him for a few minutes," Clark said.

"Yeah, me too." She saw Clark lift his head suddenly in his listening pose. "What is it?"

"Train derailment in Pennsylvania. Possible toxic chemical spill. I've gotta go."

"Go."

"Promise me you won't go anywhere alone while I'm gone?"

"Go!"

He gave her a quick kiss and headed for the stairs, tugging at his tie.

It was twenty minutes later that Ellen walked in, accompanied by Sam Lane. Lois looked up from her computer screen as they approached her desk. Ellen was obviously excited, and Sam looked worried.

"Lois!" Ellen said. "I've found something I think you ought to see!"

"What is it, Mother?" Lois smiled at her, pleased to see her mother's mood of the previous day had completely changed.Å'"How are you feeling, Princess?" her father interrupted. "Ellen told me what happened to CJ yesterday. Is he all right?"

"Yes," Lois said. "He's staying with some friends until we've solved this thing."

"I think that's a very good idea. Your mother found something this morning that disturbed me. I think you should look at it."

Ellen opened her purse and withdrew a plastic bag. "See this?"

Lois examined it. The contents appeared to be a wrinkled paper napkin. "What is it?"

"Well, your father and I went by my apartment this morning. Oh, and Clark doesn't need to come by to fix the locks. Sam did it for me, already. I was picking things up in the nursery, and I found this under CJ's little dresser. It's a napkin, see?" She flattened out the bag on Lois's desk. "It's from some place called 'The Bayside Inn'. The name's printed on the corner. I've never been to it in my life! It's got my address scribbled on it!" She paused, while Lois examined the writing. "Don't you see? Whoever broke in must have dropped it!"

* * * * *

The Bayside Inn was a small, comfortable motel with a little cafe on one side, which commanded a partial view of the harbor. Before the construction of the condominiums that Lois could see from the parking lot, the view must have been pretty impressive, but the pressures of Metropolis's growing population had obviously changed that some years ago.

The area was still fairly good, though, in spite of the fact that Suicide Slum actually began barely four blocks away. The taxi pulled to a stop in the parking lot.

"Twenty-two thirty-six," the driver said. "Do you want me to wait?"

"Yes, please," Lois said. She paid him, got out and walked briskly toward the office.

The manager was a huge bear of a man with curly, red hair, who seemed ten feet tall from Lois's perspective, considerably taller even than Clark, with massively muscled shoulders and a broad, pink face that made her think of a baked ham. Even her inch and a half heels gave her no advantage here, she found herself thinking as she tilted her sore neck backward to look up into his eyes.

The eyes were reassuring. They were bright blue, with a twinkle of amusement in them as he took in her astonishment at his size. "Can I help you, Miss?" he asked in a mild, courteous voice.

"Uh, maybe," Lois said. "My name is Lois Lane. I work for the Daily Planet." She displayed her press pass.

"Oh, really?" He glanced at the card. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Lane. I've read your articles. I'm Ambrose Johnson, the manager. Is there something I can do for you?"

"I'm looking for a man," she said. "This person may have stayed here, I don't know under what name..." She described what little she had seen of her stalker, and added details from the kidnapper's story. "Has someone like that been here, recently?"

"That depends." He raised an eyebrow. "Why would you be looking for him?"

"I'm trying to find out who he is."

"Well, I can't really give you that kind of information unless there's a good reason, ma'am."

"He was here, wasn't he?" She looked up into his face and read surprising sympathy there. "Please, you've got to tell me. It's really important. He's...I think he's been stalking me."

The pleasant expression changed. "*Stalking* you? Like following you, or--"

"That, too. Has he been here?"

He regarded her thoughtfully for a long moment, then appeared to make some decision and nodded. "For the last four weeks. He checked out this morning."

"Oh." She closed her eyes. "Can you describe him? I've only gotten glimpses of him, twice. I didn't really get a very good look at him."

Ambrose Johnson frowned, trying to visualize his former guest. "I'd say he was about six feet tall, kind of slender. His hair was sort of dark brown, I think, and curly, and his beard and mustache were more reddish-brown, than plain brown." "Å'" "Do you remember the color of his eyes?"

"Hmmm..." Johnson frowned. "Can't be sure. He usually was wearing sunglasses, and kept to himself a lot, but I think they might have been brown."

"Did he drive a car?"

Johnson shook his head. "No. He had a friend pick him up, sometimes. A couple of different guys, really." He was obviously making a sincere effort to remember. "I think one of them drove a grey car...the other, maybe brown, or green. I'm not sure. I'm sorry."

"Do you think you could give a description of him to a police artist?"

He nodded. "I can sure try." Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "I can show you his signature. Would that help?"

The name on the register was Lyndon P. Lippincott, in elegant, florid letters. Lois scanned it quickly with her pocket scanner. Ambrose Johnson watched her in silence.

"What's he done?" he asked, finally.

"Lippincott...or whatever his name really is?"

"Yeah."

Lois smiled without humor. "He tried to run me off the road. Phone calls...and he blew up my Jeep and tried to kill my husband. Does that count?"

Johnson said something under his breath. "You tell your artist friend

that I'll be ready to help any time he wants to talk to me, Ms. Lane. I know your reputation--you and that partner of yours, Mr. Kent--you speak up for the little guys when nobody else will. It's about time we did something for you."

* * * * *

In spite of her request, the cab driver was not waiting in the parking lot when Lois emerged from the motel office. She cussed softly under her breath and walked out to the street, looking around for a taxi to hail. They were usually swarming around whenever you didn't want them, so of course now, when she needed one, there were none in sight. She glanced up and down the street. No cabs. Well, Ambrose Johnson would probably let her use his phone to call one. She had started to turn to retrace her steps to the motel office when a battered, green car braked to a stop in front of her. A narrow face, chin coated with a heavy, five o'clock shadow, grinned out the window at her. "Hey, lady, need a lift?"

"No, thank you." Lois retreated quickly, but he flung the door open and jumped out.

"Come on, lady. I ain't gonna hurt ya." He made a grab for her arm. To her horror, Lois caught a glimpse past him at the driver of the car. He wore a coat with the collar turned up to hide his face, and his head was turned partially away, but the brown, wavy hair and short beard were just barely discernable. She back-pedaled.

"I don't want to go with you. Get away, or I'll scream!"

Her pursuer ignored her and lunged for her arm again, this time managing to get a grip on her wrist.

It was the first art she had ever learned in her very first self defense class, years ago. She broke his grip expertly and backed away, her body coming automatically into a defensive stance.

By now, others on the sidewalk had noticed what was going on. Some stood watching, jaws hanging open. Several people ran. Lois's assailant pulled out a knife. "Lady, don't make me cut you. Get in the car."

"In your dreams!" She turned and ran back toward the motel.

But heeled shoes are not designed for running. He caught up with her within a few steps and grabbed her by the arm, swinging her around. For an instant her face was inches from his, and she could smell his breath.

Lois brought the heel of her shoe down on his instep as hard as she could, and at the same time slammed her free hand into his nose with all her desperate strength behind it. He dropped to the sidewalk with a high shriek. Lois ran.

Ambrose Johnson emerged from the motel office like a charging bull, a tire iron in one hand. Behind her, Lois heard the screech of tires as the car peeled away from the curb. She stopped short and turned.

The green car was vanishing down the street. Her assailant was gone,

too, so he must have somehow gotten back into the vehicle before it took off. If Å'she'd seen Johnson coming after *her* like that, she'd have taken off, too, she thought irrelevantly, and stifled the sudden, hysterical urge to laugh.

Johnson turned, lowering his weapon. "You okay, Ms. Lane?"

She nodded, trying to steady her breathing. He took her arm.

"Come on back inside. I'll call the police."

* * * * *

The little room at the police station was quiet, although she could hear muffled voices from outside. Lois turned another page on the book of mug shots. She had been at this for over an hour, and so far there had been no results. She rubbed the back of her neck and wished for a cup of coffee.

Ambrose was with a police sketch artist somewhere in the building, trying to recreate his memory of the bearded man. Somewhere else the police had the napkin, trying to identify the handwriting and looking for fingerprints. She had no idea how it was progressing. She turned another page and sighed. This was hopeless. The Metropolis Police Department needed to get these things computerized.

Someone knocked on the door and she looked up as Clark entered. He crossed the room to her in three steps and put his arms around her. "Jimmy told me you were here. I just heard what happened."

"Clark, I'm all right."

"Yeah, I know." He released her, and dropped a kiss on top of her head. "I talked to Henderson, and Mr. Johnson. They told me the whole story." He notably did not bring up the fact that she had gone off to investigate on her own and Lois felt a sudden twinge of guilt.

"Clark, I'm sorry. I didn't think I could get into any trouble just going to that motel. Not right out in the open like that."

"I know. Whoever this guy is, he's pretty sure of himself." He grinned against her hair. "Ambrose Johnson said he saw you take out the accomplice, whoever he is, by the way. He was impressed."

"I was pretty impressed by him. He scared them off." Lois stretched uncomfortably. "I'll be glad when the sore muscles go away...hey! That's him!" Å "Who?"

She indicated a photograph in the top left hand corner. "Paul Eastwin. That was the guy who tried to grab me."

Clark straightened up. "If you're sure, I'll tell Henderson."

"I'm sure, believe me."

A few moments later an officer was looking at the photo. "You're certain, Ms. Lane?"

"Yes, I am. I got a close-up look at him. Too close."

"Okay." The man seemed pleased. "We'll put out an A.P.B. on him. If we can pin this on him it'll get him out of our hair for awhile, too."

"What do you mean?" Clark asked.

"Eastwin's a small-time mugger, hit man and occasional muscle-for-hire," the officer told them. "Everyone knows what he does, but so far we haven't been able to get him for anything major. He's had his sentences plea-bargained down to misdemeanors more times than you can count, but this time it's attempted kidnapping with a weapon. If we can get the charges to stick we might put him away for several years, at least. Henderson's going to be happy. The guy's been a thorn in our sides for years."

"Sounds like a real charmer," Clark said.

"Yeah. I arrested him for beating up his girlfriend a couple of months ago, so I sort of know him personally. He'd blacked both her eyes and knocked out her front teeth, but the judge let him off with a warning because he was drunk at the time. Ordered him to get counseling." The man stood up and turned toward the door. "Want to lay any bets on whether he did?"

"I wouldn't bet the farm on it," Clark said, as the door closed behind him. "And I suspect that if they do find him, he won't be able to tell them any more about his employer than the first guy did."

"Probably not," Lois said. "It seems to be the way he operates."

"Maybe Ambrose's sketch will help," Clark said. "Henderson said he'll let us know when it's done." He walked up behind her and began to rub her shoulders again. "Still sore?" Å "Some. Clark, I'm sorry. I should have waited for you."

He squeezed her shoulders gently. "No, you were right. I can't run your life for you. There are times you're going to need to do things on your own. You couldn't know they'd try something right out on the street like that. I should have gotten back sooner, anyway."

"You were helping with that train wreck!"

"Yeah, but I'd have been back earlier if I hadn't made a couple of side trips." He sat down in the chair next to hers. "Remember I said I wanted to check out some things after Dr. Klein called this morning?"

"Yes."

"I talked to some people I know who used to work for LexLabs in R and D. Something about what Dr. Klein said this morning seemed familiar. There was some work on a weapon for the military that does what he described. Of course, they wouldn't go into specifics, even for Superman, but it seems that when LexLabs was broken up, one of the prototypes was missing."

Lois was silent for a moment. "LexCorps again. First 'Project

Doppelganger' and now this."

"Yeah, I know." Clark took her hand. "We're going to work this out, honey. Trust me."

"I do, Clark. At least we know more than we did a couple of days ago. What was the other thing?"

"Huh?"

"The other thing that held you up?"

"Oh, that. A burglar alarm. Some vandals broke into one of the storerooms at the Museum of Crime and destroyed some of the stuff. Probably kids." He glanced at the door. "Here comes Henderson. He's got the sketch."

The sketch was necessarily inconclusive. It showed a man with an angular face, most of his features obscured by a mustache and beard, and wearing sunglasses. Longish hair waved around his face. Lois frowned at the portrait and nodded. "I think this is him, all right," she said, ungrammatically.

"Do you recognize him?" Henderson asked. "You mean, am I sure this is the man that tried to run me off the road? It's similar. I didn't get a close look, remember."

"True. Okay, we'll use this for now, until we get something better, and we'll let you know if we make any progress on the handwriting samples. Thanks, Johnson. You've been a big help."

Ambrose Johnson nodded. "Any time, Inspector Henderson."

Clark stepped forward and held out his hand. "Thanks for helping my wife, Mr. Johnson," he said.

Johnson's enormous hand nearly swallowed Clark's. "It was a pleasure, Mr. Kent."

* * * * *

"Lyndon P. Lippincott," Perry said, looking at the scanner's reproduction of the signature in The Bayside Inn's guest book. "Sounds like a book publisher."

"Ten to one it's a phony," Jimmy said. "I'm no expert, but the handwriting looks to me like the handwriting on the napkin." He slid the blown-up photo across the table. Clark leaned over it, comparing. With a glance at his boss he lifted his glasses slightly.

"I'm nearsighted," he said, by way of explanation, and concentrated on the handwriting.

The "L" in "Lane" and the "L" in "Lippincott" and in "Lyndon" were almost identical. He saw that immediately. The letter "n" was the same, too, and the way the writer made his penstrokes...it was the same man, all right, as Henderson's experts would undoubtedly determine before long. The chances were strong that Lippincott was their man. He pushed his glasses back into place. "It looks the same to me, too," he said.

"Well," Perry said, "assuming it **is** the same person, what now?"

"I'm not sure, Chief," Clark admitted. "The physical description could fit a lot of people, and you know police sketches. Sometimes they're close, but more often there isn't a whole lot of resemblance. Lippincott, or whoever, was at The Bayside Inn until yesterday morning, according to Johnson, so he's moved his base of operations. I hate to say it, but the next move may be up to him. I hate reacting instead of acting, but..." Å "How about that tap on your phone?" Jimmy asked. "Did Henderson have any luck with it?"

"They traced it to the pay phone at the 45th Street subway station," Clark said. "Not much luck there."

"How about fingerprints?" Perry asked. "Any luck?"

"They found one clear print on the napkin," Lois said. "So far no identification, though. It feels like we're at a dead end."

One of the copy boys knocked on the conference room door, and stuck his head through. "Mr. Kent, you've got a phone call. Line three."

"Oh, thanks, Terry. I'll take it here." Clark reached for the phone. "Clark Kent."

"Mr. Kent?" The voice at the other end sounded nervous. "I need to speak to you. I have some information that I think you'll want to know. It's very important that we meet."

"What kind of information?" Clark asked.

"I can't talk about it over the phone. Let's say it has to do with LexCorp, and a project of theirs which involved your wife. There's more to it than what happened last year. Something much more dangerous."

"All right. Where do you want to meet?" Clark's voice tried to crack, and he controlled it by sheer force of will.

"Do you know the vacant lot over on Laurel Street--across from Century 22 Real Estate?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there at nine o'clock tonight. Come alone. If you aren't there, I'll wait five minutes. No longer."

"I'll be there."

The click of the receiver being hung up answered him.

* * * * *

A heavy drizzle was falling as Clark approached the vacant lot on LaurelÅStreet a few minutes before nine that evening. The pavement was damp, and the sharp glow of the street lights was softened at the edges by the heavy mist. Cars swished by, occasionally spattering the

incautious passerby with water. The air was unseasonably cool. In another week it would be officially fall, and the weather gods had apparently decided to give the residents of Metropolis a little preview of what was to come.

He could see at once why the anonymous caller had chosen this location. The lot was in shadow. Enclosed on two sides by buildings and in the rear by a high, stone wall, it would be difficult for anyone to approach without warning. Clark scanned the lot with his enhanced vision, and spotted the man at once.

He was dressed in dark clothing, standing close to the wall, invisible to anyone on the sidewalk except Superman. Clark walked quietly into the shadows and stood still, waiting. Cars swished by on the street behind him.

"Mr. Kent." The voice was very soft.

"Yes," he said.

"My name is Adrian Bender."

Clark moved slowly forward until he stood next to the wall, a few feet away from the man. "You had some information for me, Mr. Bender?"

"Yes." The lawyer nodded jerkily, and Clark saw him reach into one pocket. "I got this letter in early June," he said. "It wasn't signed, and I still have no idea who sent it. It mentioned 'Project Doppelganger'. I imagine you know what that was."

"I think so," Clark said, trying to keep his voice neutral. "The clone project."

"The clone project," Bender affirmed. "The letter advised me to obtain the file from LexLabs and give it to you."

"Why me?"

"You're the only person who can reliably contact Superman," the lawyer said, a little impatiently. "I should have done it, then."

"Why didn't you?"

Bender shrugged again, looking at the ground. "I read the file, Mr. Kent. Most of it was technical information. Charts, and graphs procedures...scientific shorthand. I didn't understand a lot of it. But there was enough I did understand to tell me that the project wasn't over when the clones were destroyed last year. There was something else...a backup plan in case Luthor failed; what you might call a dead man switch." He raised his head to meet Clark's eyes in the dimness, and the pain in his face was almost physical. "Luthor killed my brother, Mr. Kent. Oh, I know he probably didn't fire that dart, himself, but it was his order. I wanted to be the one to ruin his last plan. I wanted to even the score. I was foolish to think I could, but I did. Only, now it's too late. The plan has gone into action, the file is gone, and I know too much. My only chance is for you to tell Superman. He may still be able to stop it."

"What's the backup plan?" Clark asked.

"It took me awhile to find the place," Bender said. "They'd hidden everything very carefully, but I had access to all of LexCorp's records, and I finally tracked it down. I'm going to have to show y...Ohmigod!."

A burst of gunfire interrupted his words. Bullets sprayed across the lot, bouncing from Clark's back. He tackled Bender, throwing him flat in the mud. More bullets struck him as he shielded the lawyer with his own body, and then there was the sound of an engine, and an automobile racing away from the scene at reckless speed. Clark rose to his knees. "Bender? Are you all right?"

There was no answer. The man lay face down in the mud, unmoving. Clark lowered his glasses and scanned Bender's body with x-ray vision. In spite of his quick action, the lawyer had been struck by two of the bullets. An instant later, Superman was airborne and headed for the nearest hospital as fast as the safety of his human passenger permitted.

* * * * *

"All I could find was shell casings, Inspector," Superman said. He stood in Henderson's office, his uniform a bright splash of primary colors against the sober hues of the room. Somehow, he didn't look at all out of place. "Whatever traces there might have been were washed away by the rain."

"How's Bender doing?" Henderson asked.

"He's in critical condition," Superman said. "They don't know if he'll make it or not."

"Well, somebody was trying to kill either him or Kent," Henderson said. "Right now, considering what happened to their Jeep, I'm not sure which."

"Neither am I," Superman admitted. "Clark was lucky."

"I'd like to have a hair or two off that rabbit's foot he carries." Henderson smiled wryly and shook his head. "I thought we were through with Luthor and LexCorp after the Luckabee fiasco. LexCorp's got more heads than a hydra."

Superman nodded. "It does seem to. I--" He broke off suddenly. Then, with a gust of air that blew papers around the room, he was gone. Henderson stared after him in surprise. He'd rarely seen Superman look that startled. Or that scared.

* * * * *

The television muttered in the background, but after an attempt to keep her attention on the LNN newscast, Lois had given up. The cup of tea she had made was growing cold on the coffee table, and the magazine she attempted to read after she lost interest in the news lay face down on the floor. She glanced at the clock for the third time in as many minutes.

Come on, Lois! she chided herself. It's not as if he hasn't had to

stay out all night before.

Being married to Superman could be worse than being married to a doctor--calls at all hours, and no one to take them for you when you got tired. It went with the territory. But right now it would be nice to have some company. Even CJ would have been better than sitting here alone. She missed him, but he was probably having a ball being the center of his doting grandparents' attention in Smallville. Besides, carrying around a heavy baby wasn't her favorite activity right now, and if he were here she would hardly have been willing to put him down. The last few days had been harrowing, and she still wasn't really over the effects of their tail-end collision. She felt tired and a little sore. Her neck was stiff and painful, and would probably remain so for several days to come. And nine o'clock had come and gone two hours ago, and Clark had not returned.

She would have gone with him, but their anonymous caller had specified that he was to come alone. Wise in the ways of informants, she had known that the man almost certainly would have bolted if she'd appeared with Clark. But something had happened, that was certain.

The phone rang for the fourth time in an hour. One call had been from her mother. Of the others, the caller had twice declined to identify himself to the answering machine and Lois simply did not feel up to any more calls from *him*. Now she listened to the machine give its spiel, and then to the ensuing silence. Him again. Once more the machine hung up.

"Enough," she said, suddenly, aloud. "You call all you want. I'm not going to play anymore." With a decisive gesture she walked to the phone and switched off the ringer then picked up her cup of tea. Moving quickly, she went into the kitchen and threw the stone-cold liquid down the sink. "That's it. I'm going to bed!"

She heard the click as the answering machine came on again, and tried not to listen to the silence that followed. She almost jumped out of her skin at the voice that emerged.

"Lois..." It was a breathy whisper. "He's dead. He won't be back. I want you."

She put her hands over her ears. The voice couldn't be telling the truth. Clark was very much alive.

The smash of the window glass made her spin around. Something thumped to the rug, and vapor began to spew forth. Suddenly her eyes were tearing, her nose felt as if it was burning. Instinctively, she held her breath. Tear gas! He was trying to force her outside!

Lois ran for the stairs. If she set foot outside he would be waiting; she knew that without a doubt. Below her, the cloud of vapor swelled. There was another smash; a second canister joined the first, but Lois didn't look back. She fled blindly up the stairs, stumbling a little on the steps, and flung herself into her bedroom. With one hand, she slammed the door, and twisted the key in the lock.

She felt her way into the bathroom, eyes so full of tears that she could barely see, and turned on the tap. Cold water rushed out of the faucet. She washed her hands under the stream, then splashed water

into her eyes, nose and mouth.

When the burning subsided, she shut off the tap and returned to the bedroom. A small tendril of white was creeping under the door. With a gasp, she ran back into the bathroom and emerged a few seconds later with both bath towels. She crammed them hastily into the narrow opening to block the stinging gas and drew a deep breath.

He was out there. What kinds of lengths was he willing to go to, to get his hands on her? "Obsession" was putting it mildly! He claimed Clark wasÅ'dead, but he'd tried to kill Clark before with the bomb in the Jeep. It must have enraged and puzzled him that Clark had survived. He had to have tried something tonight, and must believe that it had succeeded, or maybe he was just trying to frighten her. Well, she had to give him that. He'd succeeded in frightening her, all right, but that didn't make her helpless.

She picked up the phone, and was not surprised to find the line dead. Her cellular phone was downstairs in her purse; there hadn't been the time to grab it. But there was one other form of communication that she could use--if he was within range. She somehow couldn't see Clark leaving Metropolis tonight except for the direst of emergencies. "Help! Superman!"

For five, eternal seconds, she thought he wasn't coming. Then the bedroom window shot open, and he was standing before her. She saw him look her over in one, quick glance.

"Stay here!" he commanded and was out the window on the word. Lois sank slowly down on the bed and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

"He must have made tracks as soon as he saw me," Clark said. He stood in the door to their bathroom, stripping off the Superman suit. "By the time I'd cleared the gas out of the house, he was gone." He wadded the suit into a ball. "I'll take care of this. It's soaked in tear gas. You don't want to touch it."

"I'll take your word for it." Lois still felt shaken, but the therapy of watching her husband disrobe in front of her was helping. Clark noticed and smiled.

"Just don't try to touch me until I get washed. That wouldn't be romantic at all," he said, and vanished into the bathroom. Lois heard the shower come on. Less than a minute later he re-emerged, his hair damp and combed back from his face, a towel around his waist. Lois could see the wet Superman suit hanging from the towel rack. He walked straight over to her and put his arms around her.

For a long moment they stayed that way, silently holding each other. Then Clark spoke.

"I don't think I've been so scared in quite a while as I was when I heard you yell. I just left Henderson standing there." He let her go and looked into her face. "You're all right, aren't you?"Å'"I'm all right. A little shaky. He was trying to force me outside, I think."

"Yeah." He swiped at a trickle of water that was making its way down

his collarbone. "You did exactly the right thing, again. This guy may think he's in love with you, or something, but he doesn't know you very well at all, does he?"

"He called four times, Clark. The last time he told me you were dead." She rested her head on his bare chest for a long moment. "I didn't believe it, though. I figured he had to have tried something that would have killed an ordinary man, but..."

"Then I must have been the target, not Bender," he said, thoughtfully.

"Bender!"

"Yeah. The guy I went to meet. It was Adrian Bender."

"So something did happen."

"Yeah." He sat down beside her on the bed. "We were shot at and Bender was hit. He's in the hospital now, in critical condition. Because of me. Our stalker must have followed me to the meeting."

"Clark, don't be ridiculous!" Lois drew back and looked him directly in the eyes. "*You* didn't shoot him! In fact, I'll bet you were the one that got him to the hospital, weren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Then you can't blame yourself. Tell me what happened."

"Okay." He sniffed her hair. "I will while you shower. I can still smell the chemicals in your hair. You don't want to accidentally get it in your eyes."

She peeled the clothing off carefully and Clark took it. "I'll rinse it for you." He stood back to let her past him and then began to fill the sink. While she washed off the chemical residue, he described what had happened, and what Bender had said.

"A dead man switch," Lois said thoughtfully, as she stepped from the shower. Clark handed her a towel, giving her an appreciative look as he did so. "What do you suppose that means?" "Å" "I don't know. I've got the letter, though. Here, want me to dry your back?"

"Very funny," Lois said.

He feigned shock. "Why, you don't think I'd have an ulterior motive, do you?"

"If you don't, I'm going to be insulted," she told him. Clark laughed and reached for her.

* * * * *

Sometime later Lois lay in bed in the darkened room with her head on his shoulder. His arm was around her, and she was sure that she wasn't imagining the fact that he held her more tightly than usual. Somehow, Clark being in protective mode didn't bother her the way it might have some years ago because she knew it wasn't prompted by

anything more than his love for her, and his wish to keep her safe from whoever was threatening her. It had been a traumatic evening for both of them and she needed to be close to him.

She could tell by his breathing that he wasn't asleep. Too much had happened this evening for either of them to be able to relax completely. "Clark?"

"Yeah?"

"I know this is reaching, but do you suppose that this thing could be related to Lex's 'backup plan'?"

His arm tightened for an instant. "To tell you the truth, I was wondering about that, too. Something's going on with it, or Bender's office wouldn't have been burned or his car blown up. Bender said it was in action, and Henderson told me unofficially that they thought the same type of explosive used on Bender's car might have been used on the Jeep. In all the confusion it kind of slipped my mind."

"Maybe we should start looking at it from that angle. This guy's obsession with me--Lex was obsessed with me, Clark."

"I know. Only, Lex knew that bullets couldn't hurt me. He came back from the dead once, but this time I not only saw him die, I pulled his body out of that collapsed tunnel, made sure it was positively identified, and was there when he was cremated. There's no way anyone is going to regenerate him this time."

Lois snuggled more tightly against him and felt his free hand stroke her hair, very gently. "Besides," Clark continued, a smile in his voice, "whoever this is, they can't know the real you very well. If he thinks he can take Lois Lane by force after killing her husband, he's living in a dream world. He'd have to sleep with one eye open for the rest of his life and have eyes in the back of his head to boot."

Lois giggled. "You know how to flatter a girl, don't you?"

"Hey, I'm only proving how well *I* know you." He pushed himself up on one elbow to kiss her. She responded with enthusiasm. Clark pulled his head back about an inch. "You know, we might not get a whole lot of sleep tonight at this rate."

She wrapped her free arm around his neck and pulled him back down. "Who cares?"

* * * * *

The postmark on the envelope was June 10th, and there was no return address.

"It's a Metropolis postmark," Lois said. "It was mailed right here in the city." She took a bite of toast and chewed thoughtfully while examining the letter.

It was handwritten on ordinary paper, and the message was short:

"Mr. Bender;

LexLabs was involved in a project, titled 'Doppelganger' under the direction of a Dr. Isaac Mamba, which potentially endangers the life of every human on the planet. I urge you to obtain the file immediately and take it to Mr. Clark Kent at The Daily Planet, with instructions to give it to Superman. He will know what to do with it. If you fail to do this it will very probably result in unprecedented disaster for humanity. The file is among the archives of the Gemini Team, employed by LexLabs between the years of 1993 and 1996."

The letter was unsigned, of course. Lois read it over twice before she looked up. "Well, that's pretty straightforward."

"Yeah. There's some sort of disaster in the making that Superman might be able to prevent, and we have no idea what it is." Clark examined the letter from all sides, and the envelope in which it had been sent. "Hmm. There's a number scribbled on the back of the envelope. It's not the same handwriting as on the letter."

"Maybe it's Bender's," Lois suggested.

"Maybe." Clark squinted at the letter again, then removed his glasses and examined it minutely. "You know, there's something familiar about this handwrit--" He broke off abruptly. "Oh my God."

"What?"

"Just a minute. Maybe I'm wrong." He was out of the kitchen in a flash, and Lois heard him opening the bookcase door to the room that concealed his uniforms. A moment later he was back, a familiar piece of paper in his hands. "This is the note that we found with CJ. Give me a minute."

Lois watched tensely as he compared the writing in the two letters. When he looked up, his face was pale. "It's the same handwriting. Whoever sent this wrote both of these letters."

"The same person? Then CJ is somehow tied to this backup plan of Lex's?" Lois's eyes met Clark's, her expression stricken.

"It looks like it," Clark said.

"Oh, Clark! 'Project Doppelganger' was the clone project! Does that mean that CJ is some sort of clone?"

"Maybe." Clark put his hand over hers. "But not necessarily. And even if he is, that doesn't change anything." He clenched his jaw tightly. "There's one way to find out."

"Dr. Klein," Lois said.

"Yeah, Dr. Klein," Clark said. "He could find out one way or another. At least we'd know, and he wouldn't give anything away."

"Clark, CJ looks so much like you. Could he be a clone of you?"

Clark shrugged. "I guess it's possible, but I don't see how. I've been careful ever since the Superman clone appeared. He retrieved the

lock of hair they used to clone me, and I destroyed it."

Lois nodded. "Lex was probably behind that, too, you know. His people were the only ones who ever produced clones that we know of, and he would have loved to have had a Superman under his control."

"Yeah. It makes sense." Clark squeezed her hand. "Shall we ask Dr. Klein to do the test?"

Lois bit her lip and then nodded again. "Yes. That way we'll be sure."

"Okay." He reached over and pulled her into his arms. "Lois, CJ has been with us for over three months, and he's shown no sign of accelerated growth. I'm going to ask Dr. Klein, as Superman, to do the test, and tell him why. Personally, I doubt there's anything to worry about, but they're after CJ for some reason. We need to eliminate this possibility."

"Do you suppose he's at S.T.A.R. Labs? It's Saturday."

"I'll call him. I want to explain the situation in person, anyway."

Incredibly, the scientist was not at his lab. Clark called his home. After four rings, Dr. Klein answered.

"Hello?" He muffled a sneeze.

"Dr. Klein? It's Superman. You sound like you aren't feeling well."

"Superman?" Dr. Klein's voice was clearly surprised. "Yes, I have a cold. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is. I'd like to come by to see you, if that's all right. I don't want to discuss this over the phone. It's private."

"Yes, certainly. Come right over."

"Thank you, Doctor Klein. Would it be all right if I brought someone along? We need to explain something."

Dr. Klein sneezed again. "As long as he doesn't mind risking a cold."

"We'll be right there. Thanks." He hung up.

* * * * *

Dr. Klein frowned as Superman finished speaking. "So, you're saying that somehow CJ may be connected to this 'Project Doppelganger' and you want me to run a check on him for frog DNA."

Superman nodded. "That's it in a nutshell, Dr. Klein. It's one possibility we'd like to eliminate, if possible."

"All right." Bernard Klein grinned crookedly at the super-hero, then muffled a sneeze in his handkerchief. "You know, my life has gotten a lot more exciting since I became your doctor, Superman. Bring CJ here

and I'll get a sample. I have the equipment available to take it and preserve it until I can transport it to the Lab. That's probably the best, anyway; I assume you want to keep this confidential, no matter what the results."

"Yes," Clark told him. "Clark and Lois don't want any unpleasant rumors circulating about CJ, and I don't blame them."

"I understand that. Don't worry, Lois, I'll be very careful."

"Thanks, Dr. Klein," Lois said.

"I'll be back shortly with CJ," Clark said. "I'd like Lois to stay here, Dr. Klein. There's been several attempts to kidnap her, and I'm sort of her unofficial bodyguard when Clark can't be there."

Dr. Klein nodded. "Sure. Just keep your distance, Lois. This cold is a killer."

Lois smiled at him. "I'm not worried. If it's the one making the rounds at the Planet, I had it three weeks ago."

* * * * *

Superman was back within fifteen minutes with the baby. CJ gurgled happily, reaching for his nose, and Clark couldn't help smiling at his small son. If it turned out that CJ was a clone it wouldn't make a difference to him, he knew, and he doubted it would make a difference to Lois. CJ was still the child he had begun to think that he and Lois would never be allowed to have, either by genetics or by the authorities. His appearance had been a miracle and would remain so in Clark's eyes. And he would fight to keep him.

Dr. Klein quickly and neatly took a sample of cells from the inside of the baby's cheek. "There you go, little fellow. That ought to do it, Superman. It should only take a few days at the most, because I won't be running a complete DNA analysis. I'll call Lois when I have the answers."

"Thanks, Dr. Klein." Superman grasped his hand. "I owe you a favor for this."

Dr. Klein shook his head. "You don't owe me anything. If I can't do something for a friend once in awhile..." He broke off, looking embarrassed. "I wouldn't worry too much about this, Lois. I personally doubt I'll find any frog DNA. CJ has been growing at a normal rate, and if there were any he should have shown growth abnormalities a long time ago."

Lois hugged her baby, and then watched as Superman took off with him once more, headed for Kansas. Dr. Klein looked after him thoughtfully. "Superman cares a lot about children, doesn't he, Lois?"

"Yes," Lois said, quietly. "He does."

Dr. Klein sighed, obviously upset by something. Lois could guess what it was. He had been the one to give Superman the bad news that he could never have children with an earthwoman and, knowing Dr. Klein,

it was probably bothering him a good deal.

* * * * *

They went in to work that afternoon. Being that it was Saturday, they were pulling a half day today. Clark took off about three to cover a fire down by Hobbs Bay, and a few minutes later Lois saw Superman appear in the scenes being shown on the newsroom monitors.

She had finished her research; the piece on the City Council was ready and in Perry's hands. It should make quite a splash on the front page this evening. She anticipated a number of very indignant councilmen, and smiled at the thought. She had all the evidence, statements, and several witnesses. The mayor was going to be ducking for cover every time she saw a camera, at least for awhile. She stretched and grimaced, rubbing her sore neck. The stiffness was better today, but she still felt tired. With a sigh of frustration, she took out Bender's letter for the tenth time that day to study it fruitlessly for any other clues.

"What's that?" Jimmy was standing beside her desk, a fresh cup of coffee in his hands. "I brought you this. Two Sweet 'n' Lo's and non-fat creamer, right?"

"Thanks, Jimmy. This was the letter Bender gave Clark last night." She held it up for his examination. "It doesn't tell us a lot."

Jimmy nodded. "I heard what happened. CK was really lucky. How's Bender?" "Clark called this morning, but they weren't giving out any information. At least he's still alive."

"Yeah." Jimmy took the envelope from her hand and examined it. "There's a number on the back. I wonder what that is?"

"I don't know. It looks like Bender jotted it down for something..." She broke off, striving to remember. Clark had told her what Bender had said:

"It took me awhile to find the place. They'd hidden everything very carefully, but I had access to all of LexCorp's records, and I finally tracked it down..."

Could it be part of an address? 13427. But the number was worthless without a street name. Lois stared at the useless number in frustration, her brain running in circles. She would be willing to wager that it *was* important. Bender had been going to show Clark what he had found.

Well, maybe that was why he had insisted they meet at that lot on Laurel Street. Aware that she was grasping at straws, Lois turned to Jimmy. "Jimmy, can you do something for me? I want you to find out if there's a 13427 Laurel Street, and if there is, what kind of a building it is, and who owns it."

"You think maybe Bender was going to take Clark there, or something?" Jimmy looked dubious. "Well, I guess it's a shot. I'll get right on it."

It didn't take long. Twenty minutes later Jimmy was back, a sheet of

paper in his hands. "Here's what you wanted, Lois. You might be onto something."

"What did you find?"

"There *is* a 13427 Laurel Street. It's an office building. You're never going to guess who owns it."

"LexCorp?"

"Nope." Jimmy shook his head. "Caribbean Imports. It was leased to a Carlin & Associates, but it's not occupied as far as I can tell. Apparently, it's been vacant for almost two years."

Caribbean Imports. The name kept turning up like a bad penny. First the drug smuggling, from which it had wiggled loose, then the museum thefts and Van Doren, where its spokesmen had claimed total ignorance of any illegal activities, then Leslie Luckabee and the Vixen affair a few months ago. They had not managed to make a single charge stick. Now, somehow Caribbean Imports was tied in with LexCorp's activities, again. Maybe, she thought suddenly, they should do some investigations into ties between LexCorp and Caribbean Imports from a few years ago. Lex Luthor had had a finger in most of the crime in Metropolis, and ties to other criminal organizations internationally...maybe it was more than just a coincidence.

But right now, the name raised a red flag. And Carlin & Associates...that couldn't be a coincidence at all. Arianna Carlin was Lex Luthor's ex-wife. Luthor had used her name more than once when he had wished to conceal the fact that certain business transactions were in actuality connected to LexCorp...and himself.

She glanced at the monitors. Clark was going to be busy for some time to come, but if she went out alone there was a good possibility that she would be followed by the man who had been stalking her for days now. Come on, Lane! she told herself. There has to be a way to outsmart this guy! He probably already knew what their substitute vehicle looked like...

"Jimmy," she said, suddenly, "may I borrow your car?"

* * * * *

Forty-five minutes later, Lois exited Broadhurst's Department Store through the side doors. The clothing she wore, however, was not what she had worn when she had entered the store a short time before. Instead of the smart business suit and heels, she now wore a pair of designer jeans and a loud, sequined shirt, a cowboy hat, sunglasses, and a pair of running shoes. She felt conspicuous, but she was banking on the probability that the person following her, if he actually was, would be watching for Lois Lane, reporter, not Lois Lane, fashion disaster. As she reached the curb, she saw the cab she had called from the pay phone pull up and stop. Without pausing, she hurried over to it and slid into the rear seat.

The driver glanced at her, taking in the incredible outfit. "You must be the one that called," he stated. It wasn't a question. "Where to?"

"13427 Laurel Street," Lois said. She settled back in the seat and tried to quiet her thumping heart. She could only hope that her ruse had succeeded. She would have to have Clark recover Jimmy's car from the parking lot later.

The trip to Laurel Street was accomplished in fifteen minutes, and as far as she had been able to observe, she had not been followed. Lois paid the driver and got out, looking around. Thirteen four-two-seven was a ten story building next to the vacant lot, across from Century 22. They should've known, she thought. Bender must have meant to show Clark what he had found last night, when the two of them had been so rudely interrupted.

The building was locked up tight, as she had expected, but locks were the least of her worries. In the rear of the building she discovered a door, and a few moments later she was inside and closing it quietly behind her.

Inside, the place was empty. It was unlighted, and she removed the penlight which she kept on her key chain to help illuminate the darker areas. The floors were coated with a layer of gritty dust, which told her clearly that it had been a long time since anyone had been here. She could see the footprints she left behind as she moved about, exploring the rooms nearest to her point of entry. The rooms were empty, too. There wasn't even any furniture, or any signs that furniture had ever been here.

In growing disappointment she explored the floor, checking each room, working her way from one to another, approaching the front of the building.

She emerged from the hall into an intersecting corridor, and for a moment failed to notice. Then she saw them. She froze, heart almost literally in her mouth, before she took in the details, and relaxed slightly, her pulse still drumming in her ears almost loud enough to deafen her.

There were footprints in the dust of the hall, illuminated by the light that shone in from the glass doors of the entryway.

One set came from the now locked front doors, vanished off to her left, and returned the same way. The other set came from her left in a single line, proceeded down the hall, past the front doors and continued on out of sight into the dimness of the unlighted hallway. On closer examination she could see that, though the footprints disturbed the dust layer on the hall floor, another, lighter layer of dust had settled atop them. It had been some time since the men who had made those prints had been here.

The footprints that came from the front door and returned were most likely Bender's. He could, as the attorney who was handling the myriad details of the dissolution of LexCorp, enter the building openly and legally. But the second set...

They were larger than Bender's, thereby suggesting a larger man. And they came from the left.

Lois turned left. Moving almost on tiptoe, she followed that line of footprints down the length of the hallway until she came to a door which opened onto a flight of stairs. The footprints came from there.

LoisÅ'opened the door and entered.

The stairs went both up and down, vanishing into the darkness in both directions. She flashed her penlight around and found the prints again, coming from below. Gripping the handrail, she descended.

When she reached the basement floor she found herself facing a locked door. It was obvious that the footprints came from within, and she had no intention of stopping now. This was getting much too interesting. She reached into her handbag and removed her trusty picklock. The lock wasn't difficult, and within a few moments it clicked back. Lois pushed the door open and entered.

There was dust here, too, but not as much, and the footprints were less clear. A fine layer of the powdery stuff had sifted down over these marks as well. At least whoever had made them wasn't here now. Again, she followed them, walking well to the side so as not to disturb the trail. The prints proceeded down the hallway to a closed door, which was not locked, and she entered.

It was a small, square room, and on one side loomed a black, indistinguishable mass of what must be some sort of machinery. Lois flashed her penlight over it, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. In the darkness, with the inadequate light, it was hard to tell, but some of this had begun to look familiar.

She moved closer and squinted through the darkness, trying to make out what she was seeing. The little beam of the penlight flitted over tubing and wires, an inactive panel of some sort of gauges and controls, and...

"Oh my God..." she whispered.

It was a chamber exactly like the two she had seen in S.T.A.R Labs, that had held the bodies of the clones into which Lex Luthor had intended to transfer her soul and his own. And it was empty.

With shaking hands, she removed Clark's miniature camera from her bag. The brilliance of the flash almost blinded her, but she took two more photographs for good measure.

After waiting for her eyes to readjust, she continued following the trail of footprints. There was a jumble of prints in the dust on the floor, but they had come in a door on the opposite side of the small room. Lois followed them, keeping her light trained on the faint trail as it led her down another, shorter corridor, and to another door. Cautiously, she opened it.Å'It was a small closet. Inside, on the floor lay a voluminous, white, plastic bag with the name "Broadhurst's" across it in large, gold letters. She dumped the contents onto the floor and knelt to examine them.

There was a cardboard tag for a size medium pullover shirt, another for a jacket, an empty, plastic bag that had once contained mens' briefs, size 32-34, a tag from a pair of mens' jeans, and a torn package for mens' socks. A box that had purportedly held a pair of leather shoes, size 10, lay open in one corner. Lois crammed the items into the plastic bag and picked it up. Here was information that she could not afford to leave behind.

She closed the closet door and again shone her slightly dimmer penlight on the floor. The trail was there, and she continued to follow the prints of the now bare feet away from the closet and through another door.

The room beyond was small and empty, but the footprints crossed it in a straight line toward the opposite wall. Lois flashed her light on the wall, expecting to see another door.

What met her eyes was puzzling. It looked like the door of a bank vault, all heavy, solid metal, but without any external controls that she could see. Incredible as it seemed, the door appeared to be meant to open from the inside only, but it hadn't closed completely. It gaped open perhaps an inch, and Lois experimentally slipped her fingers into the gap and tugged.

Slowly and ponderously, the door swung open and she flashed her light inside, already half-expecting what she would find.

It was another clone chamber, exactly like the one in the other room. On the inside of the door were the controls to open the heavy metal barrier, and there was no doubt in her mind now that this vault had been built to be completely secure for its occupant. There was probably, she thought, some way to get in from the outside--perhaps by some sort of remote radio control, or something--but it was obviously designed to keep most people out.

The barefooted tracks came from there, but there were no tracks at all on the much thinner layer of dust that covered the floor inside. It must, she reasoned, have been air tight and sterile until the door was opened by the occupant of the chamber. The dust must have settled in the interval since then--four weeks? Five? She was no judge.

The skin between her shoulders was crawling. It felt as if she had entered Frankenstein's chamber of horrors, but she forced back her nervousness and located Clark's camera. Experience reminded her that evidence couldÅ'magically disappear unless you documented it, and photographs were the best she could manage at the moment. When she had finished, she exited the vault and flashed her now noticeably dimming light around the room. There were two exits; the way by which she had entered and another to her right.

She crossed the floor to the second door, trying now, for some reason, to be completely silent. Perhaps it was some sixth sense warning her of danger, for when she opened the door, which led her unexpectedly back into the main hall, with great caution, she saw something different.

Her own footprints led into the first room with the other clone chamber ten feet up the hall, dimly illuminated in the glow provided by her now rapidly fading penlight. And beside her own small tracks in the dust on the floor, overlapping them in places, were the larger ones of a man's shoe.

Someone had entered the first room and was probably even now following the path she had taken, bare minutes behind her, if that. She ran, silent in her rubber-soled running shoes, back toward the stairwell and slipped through the door. With shaking fingers, she closed it quietly behind her and hurried up the steps, her heart thumping so hard in her chest that it was almost suffocating. She

reached the landing and tugged on the door, but the heavy panel would not budge. It had been locked and, considering who might be only a minute or two behind her, taking the time to pick the lock didn't seem like a good idea. She would be in the direct view of whoever emerged from the door below her.

She looked upward. The building was ten stories tall, and the stairwell was pitch black. Her penlight was producing a feeble orange glow now, which showed her almost nothing. She switched it off and felt for the handrail. Once she had a firm grip on it she began to feel her way upward, one step at a time, trying to make no noise at all. Mentally, she counted her steps. From the first floor landing to the one for the second floor, she counted fifteen steps, and again felt for the door.

It was locked as well. With no more debate, she hurried upward trying to control her breathing. In the echoing stairwell, any noise she made would be magnified tenfold.

Below her, two floors down, the door opened. Dim light flooded the stairs below her, brilliant to her eyes which had adjusted to pitch darkness. She pressed herself back against the wall, desperately trying to breathe quietly, hoping that he had not seen her.

"Lois." The voice was distorted by the multiple echoes of the enclosed space. "Give it up, Lois. You haven't got a chance." There was the scuffing sound of a footstep on the stairs. Lois waited no longer, but began to climb as fast as she could manage in the dim light reflected from below her.

There were footsteps behind her now, also running up the steps. She reached the next floor and tugged for an instant on the door. Locked.

The building was ten stories tall. Perhaps if she got a good lead on him she could make it to the roof and have a few vital seconds to unlock the exit door. Lois was in excellent physical shape. Whoever was after her might or might not be, but it was beginning to look as if she didn't have a choice. She didn't want to have to face him down unless there was no other option. Lois ran up the staircase as fast as she could manage, not bothering to stop to check any of the other doors. Every time she did that she lost a little of her advantage. Adrenalin gave her the strength that she might not otherwise have had as she raced upward taking the stairs two at a time.

Her pursuer was pounding up the steps behind her, but she was holding her own, perhaps even gaining a little. Plain old fear had its uses, a detached part of her brain reflected even as she started up the eighth flight, the breath tearing in her throat and her lungs feeling as if they were on fire.

She could hear his gasping breaths, loud and hoarse, bouncing off the walls, and his footsteps sounded uneven. She reached the next flight, staggered upward on legs that felt like jelly, and hauled herself to the top. The door to the roof swam unsteadily before her eyes. She lurched toward it, fully expecting it to be locked as well.

The latch moved under her hands and she almost fell outwards into brilliant, afternoon sunshine, onto the rough, gravelly surface beyond.

No time to rest; She could hear his footsteps below her. She scrambled to her feet, panting harshly, pushed the door shut and ran. There had to be a fire escape somewhere around here!

The roof door squealed open a second time, and she knew suddenly that, fire escape or not, she wasn't up to the task of descending a metal ladder the same distance that she had just climbed. The world was swimming crazily before her eyes. She sucked in her breath and screamed. "Superman! Help!"

"No, Lois! Don't do this!"

The voice behind her, undistorted by the echoes of the cavernous stairwell, was horribly familiar. She spun about to face her tormenter and disbeliefÅ jolted through her like an electric shock at the familiar face which, this close, even the beard and mustache could not disguise.

A sonic boom shook the building, and a red and blue clad figure was touching down at her side. The world began to spin slowly around her, melting into a blur of wavering colors, and faded away into nothing.

* * * * *

"Lois! Oh, God, Lois! Honey, wake up!" Lois could faintly hear her husband's frantic voice in the far distance. With great difficulty, she forced her eyelids open a crack against the lead weights that seemed to be trying to hold them shut. Superman was holding her in his arms, and she thought, with a faint stirring of concern, that she had never heard him sound so frightened.

Somewhere a vague fragment of memory awoke and she muttered, "Did you get him?"

"Lois?" Clark smoothed the strands of hair that were sticking to her sweat-dampened skin back from her forehead. "Lois, wake up."

Her eyes flew open and she tried to sit up. Clark caught her against him. "Lie still, honey. It's all right."

"*Did you get him*?"

"Get *who*?" Clark looked puzzled. "I didn't see anyone. I heard you yell and when I got here I saw you faint. It scared me half to death! What happened?"

"I'm all right, Clark." She started to push herself up again, but stopped at a wave of nausea. "Well, maybe I'll just sit still for just a minute."

Clark surveyed her with concern. "Do you feel all right?"

She shook her head. "No, but I will in a minute. It was *him*. I *saw* him. Up close."

Clark looked dubious, but he had the good sense not to voice any doubts he might feel aloud. "Do you want to tell me what happened?" He still hadn't released her, she noted, and his face gave away his

emotions far more than his voice.

"Clark, I'm really all right, I promise. I just ran up nearly eight flights of stairs, nonstop."

His forehead puckered. "Lois, for your poor, befuddled husband's sake, will you *please* just tell me--in order--what happened?"

In a few short sentences, she sketched the bare outlines of what she had done in the past two hours. "So I'm all right, but we managed to lose him again," she said finally. "I know I scared you, passing out like that, but I was exhausted from running up all those stairs, and then I got a close look at him--just for an instant--before you arrived."

"Who was it?" he asked finally. "You recognized him, didn't you?"

She nodded. "The drawing wasn't really very accurate. And it isn't the real one, you know. It can't be. It has to be a clone."

"Luthor," he said.

"Yes."

He looked down, obviously scanning the structure below them. "There's no one down there now that I can see. But I can't see into the basement."

"Lead lining?"

He nodded. "I guess that would be logical, if there was something they didn't want me to find out about."

Somewhere below them there was a muffled explosion, and the surface beneath them shook. Clark scooped Lois into his arms and rose into the air as it swayed perilously beneath them. More explosions, and the ten story office building simply disintegrated into dust and rubble, collapsing in upon itself as Superman lifted her high above it to escape the flying debris.

* * * * *

"Superman found the vault door," Clark was saying. "The clone chambers were pretty much crushed beyond recognition, though. If Lois hadn't gotten these pictures we'd have no idea what they were." He gestured at the photos that lay on the conference table, courtesy of Jimmy Olsen. "Inspector Henderson's having investigators look over the debris, and thanks to your photos, Lois, they'll have some idea what to look for. They brought S.T.A.R. Labs in on it, too, since they handled the first set of clones confiscated from LexLabs." "You're sure of what you saw, Lois?" Perry asked. "Are you certain it was Luthor?"

"I'm sure, Perry."

Clark glanced at his wife. Her face was still pale, and she looked tired. All this stuff was taking a toll on her, he thought. They had believed Luthor was gone. Now they had him in another

incarnation--only this time it was a clone. The question was, did he have the original's memories? How could he? And yet, the obsession that the original Luthor had had over Lois seemed to be very much intact. The other question was, if this Luthor had the original's memories, why didn't he seem to know that Clark was Superman?

"Why is he after CJ, though?" Jimmy's voice broke through Clark's abstraction.

Lois answered that. "I don't know, Jimmy. We know he seems as obsessed with me as the real Luthor was. Maybe he figures...oh, I don't know."

Clark glanced at his watch and stood up. "You've got my story on the fire, and Lois's on the building, Chief. Do you mind if I take Lois home? She's had a tough day."

"Clark, I'm okay."

No, you're not, he wanted to say, but he didn't. "It's already past six," he continued. "We're going to want to get an early start on this thing, tomorrow."

"Yeah, you're right," Perry said. "Get on out of here, kids. See you in the mornin'."

Lois's phone rang as Clark was cleaning off his desk. She picked it up. "Lois Lane...Hello, Dr. Klein." Clark had to consciously refrain from eavesdropping. He saw her nod. "All right. Clark and I are just getting off. We'll drop by S.T.A.R. Labs on the way home."

Clark's eyes met hers in a silent question. She hung up. "Dr. Klein has something important he needs to tell us, Clark. He wants to talk to us personally."

They rode the elevator down to the parking lot level, and Clark carefully checked over the rental car before either got into it. When they pulled out onto the street, Clark asked, "Did he say anything else?" Å "You didn't listen?"

"Lois, you know I don't like to do that."

"He didn't say anything else, but he didn't sound upset. I kind of have a good feeling about this."

"It's about time something went right," Clark said. "So the clone was Luthor's backup plan, huh?"

She turned left under the nose of a yellow light. "I have the feeling that the clone is only part of it, Clark. There were *two* chambers, remember. Who was in the other one, and why will everyone on earth be in danger if Luthor succeeds with whatever he's up to? And why is a *clone* obsessed with me? I take it we're both agreed that he seems to be obsessed with me."

"I think that's pretty obvious, Lois."

"So, does he have Luthor's memories, and if he does, why doesn't he know that you're Superman?"

"I've been thinking about that last one," Clark replied, slowly. "I think it might have to do with exactly *when* the clone was made."

"What do you mean?"

"Luthor found out about me the day he died. We know the clones were made well before that. They couldn't have been made afterwards, because Henderson's men raided the lab and confiscated everything. We don't know how this Luthor got the original's memories, although he seems to have most of them, but what if he was given them some time before that last day? I think this clone must have been already made and stored in that clone cylinder, waiting its signal, whatever that might be, to take over if Luthor failed. He may be short anywhere from several days to several weeks of the original's memories."

Lois accelerated past a slow-moving truck and dodged in front of a bus to beat the red light at the next intersection. Clark stoically ignored his wife's driving. Lois was a skilled Metropolis driver. All of her tickets were for parking violations. He had discovered them one day when he opened the glove compartment, looking for the Jeep's maintenance schedule.

"If you're right, that's one problem we won't have to worry about," she said. "I think I'm right, or close enough," he said. "This Luthor doesn't know Superman's secret."

"That's one point in our favor," she said. "This scheme of his seems crazy, though. A clone to finish what he started? It wouldn't do *him* any good."

Clark nodded. "I agree, it *is* crazy. But I don't think Luthor was entirely sane at the last. Everything he built had come crashing down, one way or another, because of you, me and Superman. I think he was so obsessed there in the last few weeks of his life that he would have gone to any lengths to defeat Superman, and prevent Clark Kent from marrying the woman he wanted."

"Clark, you're talking about yourself in the third person again."

He grinned slightly. Lois still had her sense of humor. Things couldn't be too bad.

* * * * *

Dr. Klein was waiting for them in his lab, and ushered them into his small, cluttered office without a word. He closed and locked the door and waved them to chairs. Clark tried to read the expression on his face, and utterly failed. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought Dr. Klein was looking almost...smug? His nose was red, but he wasn't sneezing. He smiled slightly at Clark's inquiring look.

"Antihistamines are wonderful things," he remarked, humorously. "Thanks for suggesting them, Lois. I have most of your answers, and I won't keep you in suspense. I ran several tests to be completely sure. CJ shows absolutely no sign of doppel-buffo frog DNA."

Lois closed her eyes and let out her breath. "Then he's **not** a clone."

"I'm not done," Dr. Klein said. "He doesn't show any sign of human DNA, either. CJ is a Kryptonian."

"**What*?*" Lois almost jumped out of her chair.

Dr. Klein smiled slightly at her. "Lois, I suspected it on the second test, so I ran several more to confirm it. CJ is unquestionably a Kryptonian. Then I did a couple of genetic comparisons and came up with three matches right off the bat. That, combined with his appearance, makes me suspect CJ may be a clone of Superman, without frog DNA to complicate things. I'm going to run more tests to be absolutely sure. I still have the sample Superman gave me when that woman claimed he was the father of her son. I'll use it as a basis for comparison, but I don't think I'll be surprised by the results."

Lois clenched her fists in her lap. "Is CJ going to deteriorate the way the Lois clone did?"

Dr. Klein shook his head vigorously. "Absolutely not, Lois. His cells are as healthy as...as Superman's. For his species, he's a perfectly normal little boy, who should live a perfectly normal lifespan--whatever that may be for a Kryptonian. Natural clones appear in nature all the time, you know. They're called identical twins. CJ is Superman's identical twin brother--only 30-some years younger." He regarded the two of them with a smile. "You two are going to have a big responsibility--to raise CJ to be as good a man as Superman." He added casually, "I'll be keeping these records with the ones I keep for Superman. Nobody ever has access to them but me, so no one else will ever see them. Even the computer files are invisible. CJ's secret is safe."

"We know that, Dr. Klein" Clark said, a little awed at the loyalty of the scientist. Dr. Klein still had the power to surprise him, sometimes. He got to his feet. "You've just answered a lot of questions. We can't ever thank you enough."

Dr. Klein gave a little smile. "I'm glad I could help, Clark."

* * * * *

"Wow," Clark said, very quietly, after he had closed the car door. He made no move to start the engine. "This has sure been a day for revelations."

"That's for sure." Lois had an odd expression on her face. "I said I had a good feeling about this."

Clark turned toward her in the seat and took her hand. "Does it bother you? That CJ is...well, me?"

"Clark he **isn't** you! Any more than one twin is its brother or sister. He's your **brother**. And **our** son." She smiled at that. "No, it doesn't bother me at all. We have a healthy baby boy, I know where he came from, and I don't care. I love him. That's all that matters."

Clark regarded her with awe. He'd expected something like this from her, but it was still astonishing to him. "I married an incredible woman, you know that?" She lifted an eyebrow at him and grinned impishly. "Naturally." Her smile faded. "How did they manage to clone you, Clark? I thought you said that lock of hair was destroyed."

"It was. I suppose Luthor could have kept a few strands separate from the lock he gave the clone in hopes of the technology improving enough that he could create a longer-lived Superman."

"It fits him," Lois said. "He always had backup plans."

"Just like this time," Clark said. He stopped as an idea hit him. "Of course! That's it!"

"What?" Lois looked puzzled.

"Let me think this through," Clark said. His mind was racing. "How's this for a hypothesis? The first clone was defective and died after only a few weeks, right?"

"Right."

"And they had to have accelerated his growth, right?"

"Right." Lois said, looking puzzled.

"Okay, so that means Luthor hadn't had him around very long. He didn't really have much time to develop any genuine loyalty to Luthor, and the clone betrayed him after he realized what Luthor wanted him to do was wrong."

"Well, yes," Lois said. "You're basically a good person, Clark. I don't think Luthor ever realized how much that's a part of what you are. The clone had it, too, underneath."

"Maybe," Clark said. "But tell me, Lois, what if that clone had been raised for twenty years by someone like Luthor? Do you think he would have acted the same way if he'd been taught a completely different set of values by someone who had taken the time and effort to secure his loyalty?"

"What are you getting at?"

"You told me that Luthor said the Type A clones had a lifespan of a hundred years. If this Luthor clone is a Type A, and I'd say he probably is, then he has a long time to live. He can afford to wait awhile. Suppose that's why they created CJ? Suppose the Luthor clone was intended to raise CJ, gain his loyalty and then, after he was grown, have him challenge me, the way Luthor had the first clone do? He'd have the advantage, then. And can you imagine what would happen to Earth if Lex Luthor had a young, unprincipled Superman under his control?"

They stared at each other, appalled. Then Lois said, "Of course, that's only a theory."

"Yeah," Clark said. "But I'll bet I'm at least partly right. Why else would he be so desperate to get his hands on CJ? CJ is the key to

Luthor's revenge, but he doesn't have any powers right now. First he has to grow up, and if we raise him he won't have the values Luthor needs for him to have."

Slowly, Lois nodded. "And someone left him with us to try to stop it, just like he sent that letter to Bender. Everyone knows we're Superman's closest friends. But who would have done it? CJ must have been in that other cylinder I saw. Who could have known where he was hidden?"

Clark shook his head. "One of Luthor's employees? Maybe one who decided the plan was wrong?"

"Or," Lois said, "maybe one who was just scared by the whole idea. Even if I were a criminal, the thought of something like that would terrify me." Her eyes widened suddenly. "Oh my God!"

"What?"

Lois pulled down her safety belt and fastened it. "Take us home, Clark!" she commanded. "I think I know, but I don't want to say who until I check something! It fits all the facts, but...let's go! What are you waiting for?"

* * * * *

Clark brought the car to a halt in front of the brownstone, and Lois was out the door almost before he had turned off the engine. By the time he had locked the doors and climbed the steps to their house, she was already inside and tugging at the bookcase.

It swung open as he closed the doors and locked them. "What are you looking for?"

"The letters. I need you to do a handwriting comparison. Boot up the computer, will you? Pull up those documents we scanned out of LexCorp's archives when you did your expose of the whole clone mess. I have a prettyÅ' good idea what to look for, now."

He did as she asked and, by the time she had located the letter that had come with CJ the night they had found him as well as the letter to Bender, Clark had the requested files ready. Lois bent over the computer, and called up a specific document. "There. Compare the signature to the handwriting, would you?"

Clark's eyebrows had gone up when he saw what she had retrieved, but he removed his glasses and bent to the task. A few very long seconds later, he looked up.

"Well?" Lois demanded.

"Have I ever told you how incredible you are?" he said.

"Yes, but you can say it again."

"Well, you're unbelievably brilliant. I would never have guessed it in a thousand years. There must be some good in him, after all."

"You always say there's good in everyone," Lois reminded him.

"I guess so. But it's encouraging to see the proof of it sometimes. He could have killed CJ; it would have been safer. Instead he brought him to us. How did you know?"

"It was the only thing that fit all the facts," Lois said. "After all, who would be more likely to know where the clones were kept than the man who made them?"

"No wonder Mamba disappeared after he was released from prison," Clark said. "He must have gone to the building after he got out; he might even have tried to do something about the Luthor clone. We'll never know for sure. But Luthor must have been secured in that vault where no one could get to him, so instead he stole CJ, dropped him off on us, and ran for his life."

"Probably one of the most sensible things he ever did," Lois agreed. "You know, I still don't like him very much, but I'm grateful to him. We owe him a lot. It wasn't his fault that Bender didn't turn that file over to you, like Mamba asked him to. If he had, we might have been able to prevent this before it started."

"Yeah, but there's nothing we can do about that," Clark said. "We still have to deal with the Luthor clone. He's going to be after CJ as long as he lives."

"Then we have to convince him that CJ isn't his Superman clone," Lois said. There was a determined glint in her eye that Clark had come to know well. "Somehow. What I'd like to know is how Luthor did a transfer of his own memory. He apparently didn't for the Lois clone."

"How could he?" Clark asked. "If they duplicated Luthor's memories in the clone, they were able to because Luthor was available--probably right after he was released from prison. But they couldn't do it for the other Lois, because they didn't have you. All they could do was teach her what they thought you should know."

She was nodding. "That makes sense. But the actual transfer is something else. Barring super-scientific duplicating machines out of Star Trek, how could they accomplish it?"

"Well, he was going to transfer your souls into the clone bodies," Clark pointed out. "It seems to me that it would be just as impossible, and yet Luthor was apparently confident it would work. I can't see him risking his precious skin on anything he wasn't certain of. Maybe he was so sure because he'd already seen something similar--like a memory transfer."

"Asabi," Lois said, her voice hard. "It had to be Asabi. He was going to do the soul transfer. Then you came, and he ran away."

"Maybe we should check him out tomorrow," Clark said.

"Tomorrow? Why not tonight?"

"Lois, it's nearly eight o'clock. His store is probably closed."

But Lois was already grabbing her purse. "The only way to be sure is

to check. Come on."

They had to park the car halfway up the block because of the renovation going on over most of the street. The asphalt was torn up in chunks, and red warning cones and temporary NO PARKING signs were scattered over the area. The little store on the corner of Birch and Jefferson was closed up tight. The lights were off, and there was no sign of activity to be seen. Lois gazed at the building in frustration. "Darn! I guess you were right. We'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Yeah." Clark said. "Oh, well, as long as we stick together I don't see anything to worry about, and I have no intention of going anywhere tonight. The emergency services can handle things for once. Superman is taking the night off."

"Clark, I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. But this is Luthor, Lois, not your ordinary criminal. Unless there's a major disaster, I'm not going anywhere."

Almost on the word, Lois's cellular phone rang. She reached into her purse for it. "Hello?"

"Hello, Lois? It's Martha. Is Clark anywhere around?"

"He's right here, Martha. Is something wrong?"

"Well..." Clark's mother seemed uncertain. "I'm not really sure, but he told us to call you if anything happened that seemed unusual."

"What happened?" Lois asked, at once. "Is CJ all right?"

"He's fine," Martha said. "He's sound asleep in his playpen. But...well, a salesman came to the door a little while ago. That's not all that unusual--we get them now and then. But this one was trying awfully hard to get me to let him inside so he could demonstrate his products. I had to slam the door on his foot to get rid of him. I thought he'd left, but a few minutes ago Jonathan saw him again. He's sitting out on the road in his car, right by our fence, watching the house with a pair of field glasses. I'm a little worried."

"I don't blame you!" Lois glanced at her husband. "Did you hear that?"

He nodded. "I sure did. Maybe I'd better go get CJ."

"No maybe about it!" Lois said. "Go!"

He held out his arms. "Come on."

"Clark, just go! You can get there in seconds without me. I'll be fine. I promise, I'll go right home."

He hesitated for a long second, then nodded reluctantly. "All right, but I'm going to walk you back to the car, first," he said. "It'll only take a minute." "Then let's hurry!" She lifted the phone to

her ear again. "Hold on, Martha. Clark will be there in a few minutes!"

They hurried back toward the car. Lois paused with her hand on the door. "All right, I'm here! Now go!"

"All right." Clark half-ran toward the darkness of an alley twenty feet away and vanished within. A moment later, she heard the "whoosh" of Superman's takeoff, followed by a sonic boom.

She opened the car door and got in. Too late, she realized that in her concern over CJ she had neglected a basic safety measure which every woman in Metropolis was taught from the moment she learned to drive.

"Hello, Lois," Luthor said.

* * * * *

Clark entered the bedroom of the brownstone through the window, CJ in one arm. The baby was sound asleep, one small fist in his mouth and, now that he knew what to look for, he could see himself clearly in the tiny features. This little boy was his brother, as well as his son--the only creature on Earth who was actually biologically related to him. There was no way on the face of the planet that he would allow Luthor to get CJ in his power.

Lois wasn't in the house. He couldn't hear her heartbeat, but he hadn't taken that long--barely fifteen minutes from the time he had left her beside the rental car, and most of that had been used during the return trip. She had not had time to reach home yet. Still, he felt a faint stirring of uneasiness.

Moving quietly, he laid CJ in his crib and spun back into his civilian clothes. With meticulous care, he closed and locked the window and left the room. Lois should be home in a few minutes.

Ten minutes later he was pacing the floor. Surely she should be back by now. All right, she might get annoyed, but he didn't care; he was worried. He went to the phone and punched in the number to her cell phone.

The phone rang and rang and rang.

By the time he hung up, he had progressed from worried to frantic. Lois would have answered the phone if she could have. And she should certainly have gotten back by now. Something was badly wrong. He needed to go look for her, but he had no idea where to look, and he couldn't leave CJ alone. He went to the phone and, after a moment of internal debate, dialed Perry's number.

"Hello?" His editor sounded grumpy. Clark could hear soft music playing in the background.

"Perry, I've got a bit of an emergency."

"Clark?" Perry's voice changed. "What's the matter?"

"Lois has disappeared. I need to go try to find her, but I don't have anyone to watch CJ. I remembered that you offered..."

"Say no more," Perry said. "It just so happens that Alice is here. We'll watch him for you. Bring him over, and you go find Lois."

Yeah, he'd interrupted Perry's date, all right. "Chief, if you're busy, I can call Jimmy."

"Nope. You heard me, son. Bring him over. Alice agrees with me."

"I'm on my way," Clark told him, and hung up. Ten minutes later he was knocking on the door of Perry's home. Alice, in a black, cocktail dress, and a strand of pearls, opened the door.

"Hello, Clark." Her eyes went immediately to CJ. "Oh, my, he's getting so big! Give him to me and don't worry about him."

"Thanks, Alice..."

"Go!" In many ways his editor's ex-wife reminded him of Lois. "Hurry! Lois may be in trouble!"

"Yes, ma'am."

As soon as the door was closed behind Alice, Superman was in the air.

A flight over to Birch and Jefferson showed him that the car was sitting exactly where he had left it, and Lois's handbag was lying on the front seat. A note lay prominently atop it.

"Kent: If you want to see your wife again, have Superman bring the baby to the abandoned subway tunnel under Suicide Slum, nearest the 23rd Street Station. Tell him to come alone." He read the note twice. The handwriting was Luthor's, all right. His impulse was to rush directly over to the station, but he resisted it. Luthor would never make things this easy, and he certainly had no intention of letting Clark have Lois back. No, it had to be a trap for Superman.

* * * * *

"There you go, Lois. I hope you won't be too uncomfortable until I can complete my business with Superman," Luther said, pleasantly. He pulled experimentally on the chain of the cuffs that held her to the chair. Her hands were behind her back at an angle that made any movement distinctly painful, and the chain of the handcuffs was looped through one of the round, wooden posts of the chair back, preventing any effective attempt at escape. "After I have...what do you call him--CJ? How conventional of you, naming him after Kent--we'll be on our way to a new life in Europe, well away from Metropolis and your husband." He moved around until he was facing her. "It's unfortunate that you didn't wait for me, you know. I would have married you. But, sometimes one can't have everything one wants."

"Why do you want CJ?" Lois gritted. She yanked futilely on the handcuffs, and only succeeded in bruising her hand. "He's of no use to you!"

"My dear," Lex said. "Surely you, brilliant reporter that you are, have realized by now that CJ is no ordinary child."

"What?" Lois stared at him, hoping that her acting skills were convincing enough. She tried wiggling her hand against the circlet on one wrist, then the other. The left one seemed marginally less tight than the other. "What on Earth are you talking about?"

Luthor smiled. It chilled her to see Luthor's smile again, the smile of a man she had believed was dead, on the face of his doppelganger. Except for the short, curly beard and mustache, he looked exactly like the original Luthor, with the angular, handsome face, brown eyes and curly brown hair of the man she had once known. "Lois, CJ is a clone. A very special clone, which I had constructed for a very special purpose."

"Don't talk about yourself as if you're the real Luthor!" Lois said. "Lex Luthor is dead. You're nothing but a cheap copy."

The smile on Luthor's face faded slightly. "Don't push me too far, Lois. As I was saying, CJ is special. He's a clone of Superman. Do you have any idea what I'll be able to accomplish when he's grown and has developed his powers?" "You're out of your mind," Lois said. "CJ is a relative of Clark's. His teenage cousin couldn't keep him, so we took him."

Doubt flickered over the clone's face for a second. "Don't lie to me, Lois. Superman will bring him to trade for you, and Superman will die. Then I'll have the only Superman. A Superman that is loyal exclusively to me."

So he intended to kill Superman. Big surprise there. "You don't have any Kryptonite. Even a clone can't be so stupid not to know that only Kryptonite can kill Superman." As she spoke, she was glancing surreptitiously around the tunnel. Luthor had some sort of plan. She had to find out what it was. She wiggled her hands against the cuffs again. It hurt, but staying Luthor's prisoner was worse. There had to be a way to get these things off.

Naked electric bulbs illuminated the immediate area, but beyond the circle of light was blackness. Next to the wall, ten feet away and almost out of her line of sight, some sort of control panel had been set up; heavy cables ran away from it into the dark. Luthor chuckled, softly. "Not only Kryptonite, Lois. I see that you've noticed my setup here. See this?" He gestured at the controls. "One other thing is known to harm Superman. Surely you remember Lenny Stoke? I knew him during my stay in prison. He told me all about his sound weapon."

"What?" Lois stared around the tunnel, now picking out the speakers placed here and there on the walls.

"Oh, yes. Since Kryptonite seems to be so hard to come by, I had to come up with a backup plan. Fortunately, the Museum of Crime isn't so well guarded as S.T.A.R. Labs. Nor does it have its property so well hidden."

"That break-in," she said. "It wasn't vandals. It was you."

He nodded. "Superman will bring CJ to trade for you, as I said, and I intend to kill him. The sound is set at a level that can only affect someone with Super-hearing. Don't place your hopes in Superman, my dear. He won't make it across the room."

"Superman would never give an innocent baby to a monster like you. Neither would Clark."

"He will." Luthor smiled at her, and there was sheer cruelty in the smile. "Both of them are in love with you. They'd do anything for you. They're fools. I love you, too, but I'm not foolish enough to give you your independence, Lois. I have no intention of putting up with your tantrums the way that weakling husband of yours does."

"Clark is ten times the man you are," Lois said. "You're a fool if you think he'll let you get away with this. A *real* man treats his wife as an equal partner, not a servant. I'm ashamed that I even *considered* marrying Lex Luthor when Clark is so incredibly superior in *every* way!"

"*I* am Lex Luthor."

"No, you're not. You're a fake. A copy of a third rate crook who was *nothing* without his money and a bunch of toadies to follow his orders. He couldn't even make his money honestly! His whole empire was based on lying and cheating! And now *you* think you can raise a Superman to be loyal to you? Don't make me laugh! Even if you ever *do* find your Superman clone, he won't follow you, because people didn't follow Lex out of loyalty, either. They followed him out of fear and greed! A Superman *you* raised wouldn't be any more loyal than any of the others!"

The clone's face had flushed faintly--out of anger, Lois thought. She was getting to him, all right. But his voice showed no sign of annoyance. "Don't worry about me, my dear. I always get what I want, and it would be wise for you not to oppose me."

"You won't get *me*," Lois fairly spat at him. She pulled at the cuffs again. The skin of her wrists felt raw, and a wetness that might be blood gathered under the metal that gripped them. "I'll fight you until the day I die!"

"That can be arranged."

"Oh, really?" Lois said, sarcasm dripping from every word. "Then there's the measure of your so-called 'love' for me! The *real* Lex was sprayed with that pheromone compound. He couldn't help himself, but you're not him. All you have is the memory of loving me. The *real* Lex would never have threatened to kill me!"

Luthor smiled tightly at her. "You have spirit," he said. "That's one of the qualities I admire about you, Lois. But there's such a thing as too much of a good quality. You'll learn to control it. What if I *am* a copy? I have everything the original had. I remember being Luthor, and all the things he did. Even the original cell that I grew from came from him. I am Lex Luthor in everything that matters. Haven't you heard the saying: 'A difference which makes no difference *is* no difference'?"

"How did you get the memories?" she asked. "Are they fakes, too?" "By no means. That was Asabi's work. Very good work, too. I have the memory of the transfer ceremony--it's the very last memory I have of being in the old body before I woke up in this one."

Lois pulled on the cuffs again. They were too tight. No matter how hard she tried to compress her hand, it wasn't going to slip through. She pulled hopelessly against the unyielding metal.

And felt the wooden post, around which the chain of the cuff was looped, wiggle slightly.

"So I owe this mess to Asabi?" she said, viciously. "Remind me to thank him when I get out of here!"

"My dear, I have no intention of letting you go. And you might as well stop fighting. Those handcuffs aren't going to come off."

She pulled at the cuffs, feeling the post wiggle again. It was loosening, very slowly.

"Why do you want me, Lex?" she asked, more for the distraction value than anything else. "You don't love me. We both know it."

The clone looked thoughtful. "I suppose it's because Kent has you," he said, finally. "Kent and Superman both want you, and I can't allow them to win. Not again. They've hurt me too many times. But I *do* love you, Lois, and I'll prove it. In time you'll learn to love me."

"Not in this lifetime."

Luthor didn't answer. He smiled without humor and turned toward his control panel. Lois jerked on the handcuffs. Her wrists felt as if they were burning, but the wooden post was much looser. She pulled slowly and steadily, now, and suddenly it was free at the base. Lois squirmed, trying to work the chain of the handcuffs down. If she could just slip it over the bottom of the post, her hands might not be completely free, but she would no longer be fastened to the chair.

The clone glanced at her, hands on the controls. "Lois, I'm getting bored with this conversation. Nothing you say can change what's going to happen. You might as well accept it."

She used a four-letter word. "You know, you're insane. You had a chance to start over, free of Lex's crimes, and you chose to throw it all away. You didn't have to follow in his footsteps. But now you're a criminal in your own right. Kidnapping, murder, attempted murder...you're running up quite a list for being only a month or two old."

"Six weeks," he said, with a slight smile. "I awoke six weeks ago."

"That's a lot for six weeks," she said. She tugged on the handcuffs again, striving to slide them lower on the post. And suddenly the chain of the cuffs was free. Although her hands were still fastened behind her, she wasn't a helpless prisoner anymore. Now, all she had to do was figure out how to use the advantage she had acquired.

And at that moment Clark Kent walked casually into the light. "Hello, Luthor," he said.

For a split second everything froze, and Luthor looked astonished. Then he recovered.

"I told you to have Superman bring the baby," he said.

"I know you did," Clark said. "Why should what you want interest me?" He looked casually around the area, pinpointing the speakers. "It seems Superman was right. It *was* a trap for him." He took a step toward Luthor.

"Don't move, Kent," Luthor said. "Superman wouldn't send you alone. He's here, somewhere, waiting for you to distract me." He brought his thumb down.

Lois stood up, the chair falling over backwards at the movement, and Clark charged forward. He couldn't do anything "super" Lois knew. It would reveal his secret a second time to Luthor, and he was too far away at normal speed to stop the clone. Without another thought, cuffed hands and all, she ran at Luthor.

She couldn't hear the sound. It was pitched too high for the human ear to detect it, but the result was immediately apparent. Clark stumbled and fell, just as she hit Luthor with her shoulder at waist level.

Taken by surprise, and off balance, he fell to the floor. With her hands cuffed behind her, she knew she was no match for him but all she needed was a second. If she didn't succeed, Clark's secret would be out, which wouldn't matter anyway because he would be dead.

Clark had crumpled to the floor, and was trying feebly to crawl toward the control panel. With all one hundred and ten pounds of her body weight, Lois landed knees first on Luthor's stomach.

The clone's breath whooshed out of him in a strangled grunt. She took advantage of the few seconds respite she had gained and squirmed around. One foot tangled in the thick power cable, and she wound her ankle in its coils. Gasping, Luthor struck blindly at her. His fist connected with her cheekbone and for a second she saw stars but she didn't stop. She tugged at the cable wrapped about her ankle, trying to jerk it from the machine.

The cable held. She jerked at it again.

Luthor's hands gripped her about the torso, dragging her back from the controls of his weapon. She gave one last, frantic yank. The huge cable came suddenly free of whatever power receptacle it had been connected to. The whirring machine gave a low whine, remarkably like that of a big animal, and the tremendous hum of power died.

Luthor released her and lunged for the cord. Then Clark was on him, pinning him to the floor, and a carefully gauged punch ended the unequal struggle.

With a gesture of distaste Clark stood up, wiping his hands on his

pantlegs as if to clean them of some contamination, then bent to help her to her feet. Very gently, he snapped the handcuffs from her wrists. She brought them around in front of her to examine the damage. The cuffs had left red marks, she saw, but the wetness she had felt had only been perspiration. She turned to look at Clark. He put out his arms, and she walked into them without a word. It was over.

* * * * *

The silver Jeep Cherokee gleamed in the sunlight as it maneuvered along Metropolis's busy streets. Lois Lane, behind the wheel, glanced at her husband where he sat in the passenger seat, watching her drive.

"What are you grinning at?" she asked.

"You," he said. "You're like a kid with a new toy."

"Well," she defended, "I loved my Jeep. I'm going to miss it, but this one is almost as good."

"'Almost', huh?"

"Okay, just as good. But this one is ours, not mine--and *you* don't even need one!" He chuckled. "I promise, you can drive it most of the time."

"All right." She smiled back, and glanced at CJ in the rear, strapped securely into his safety seat. The baby, as usual when in a moving car, was sound asleep "So what happened to all that stuff of Luthor's that you found back in the tunnel?"

"Most of it is in police impound," Clark said. "But Superman saw to it that the 'Project: Doppelganger' files went to S.T.A.R. Labs. They're in Dr. Klein's hands, now. The case against Luthor is pretty clear cut without it. I don't think the D.A. is too anxious for it to become public knowledge, anyway." He reached into his pocket. "And I thought you might like to have this back."

Lois took one hand off the wheel to grasp the item Clark held out to her. "CJ's hairbrush! Where did you find it?"

"With Luthor's things, in a plastic bag. I think he may have been intending to have a DNA test run on CJ's hair--to prove one way or the other whether he was actually my clone. Considering how carefully it was being preserved, I doubt he'd gotten to that point yet--it normally requires a good deal of money, unless you have friends in the right places. And Luthor didn't have much of either. I'd say this means he *did* have his doubts, after all."

"How about CJ? Is anyone going to be asking about him?" Lois waited anxiously for the reply. It had been worrying her since last night. But Clark was shaking his head.

"Dr. Klein told Henderson that Luthor had made a big mistake--that he had already examined CJ at our request and that CJ was a perfectly normal little boy. The suspicion has already been voiced that whoever sent Bender the letter may have done away with the Superman clone, himself."

"I wonder who could have started a rumor like that," Lois murmured. Clark smiled slightly.

"So that pretty much ties up the loose ends," he continued. "Luthor won't be bothering anyone for awhile, although the legal system is tying itself into knots over exactly what legal rights a human clone has. With all the charges against him he's going to be out of circulation for several years, at the very least. Things can go back to normal--or at least as normal as things ever get for us."

Lois shook her head in contradiction as she pulled into a parking place in front of the brownstone and cut the engine. "No, Clark. One thing is never going to be the same."

"What do you mean?" Clark's face took on a concerned expression. "You haven't had second thoughts about CJ, have you? I mean, raising a child with super-powers isn't going to be quite the norm, but--"

"No, of course not," Lois said, quickly. "It's just...well, you know how tired I've been recently, what with the accident, and all..."

Clark frowned. "Yes. To tell you the truth, I've been worried," he admitted. "The whole thing was pretty hard on you. I've been thinking, maybe we ought to ask Perry for a few extra days off. It isn't as if we don't have it saved up." He looked at her suddenly. "You *are* all right, aren't you? You're not sick or anything?"

"No, I'm not sick." Lois reached over and took his hand. "You worry too much, Clark."

He put his other hand on top of hers. "I can't help it, honey. You're too important to me for me *not* to worry. And you've looked so exhausted ever since all this started--anyway, I thought maybe a short vacation to Smallville, or anywhere else you want to go might be worth it."

"Not a bad idea," Lois mused. "I could use it." She glanced back at their son sleeping soundly in his car seat. "But that's not what I was trying to say. You see, I started to get a little suspicious a few days ago, but things got so crazy that it kind of slipped my mind, especially since I didn't really believe it anyhow. But, well, it didn't go away, and then I missed again, and so I thought I'd better find out for sure before I said anything, and..."

Clark looked as if he had been trying to follow her involved explanation and gotten completely lost. The bewildered expression on his face was almost funny. Lois giggled. "I'm sorry, Clark, I'm babbling. I thought this would be so easy to tell you and...well, I guess I'd better just say it. I took a test from the drugstore this morning. I'm seeing a doctor this afternoon, and if the one he performs comes back positive, too, Superman's going to need to have a long, heart to heart talk with Dr. Klein..."

The End

(The sequel is "Blind Man's Bluff".)

End
file.